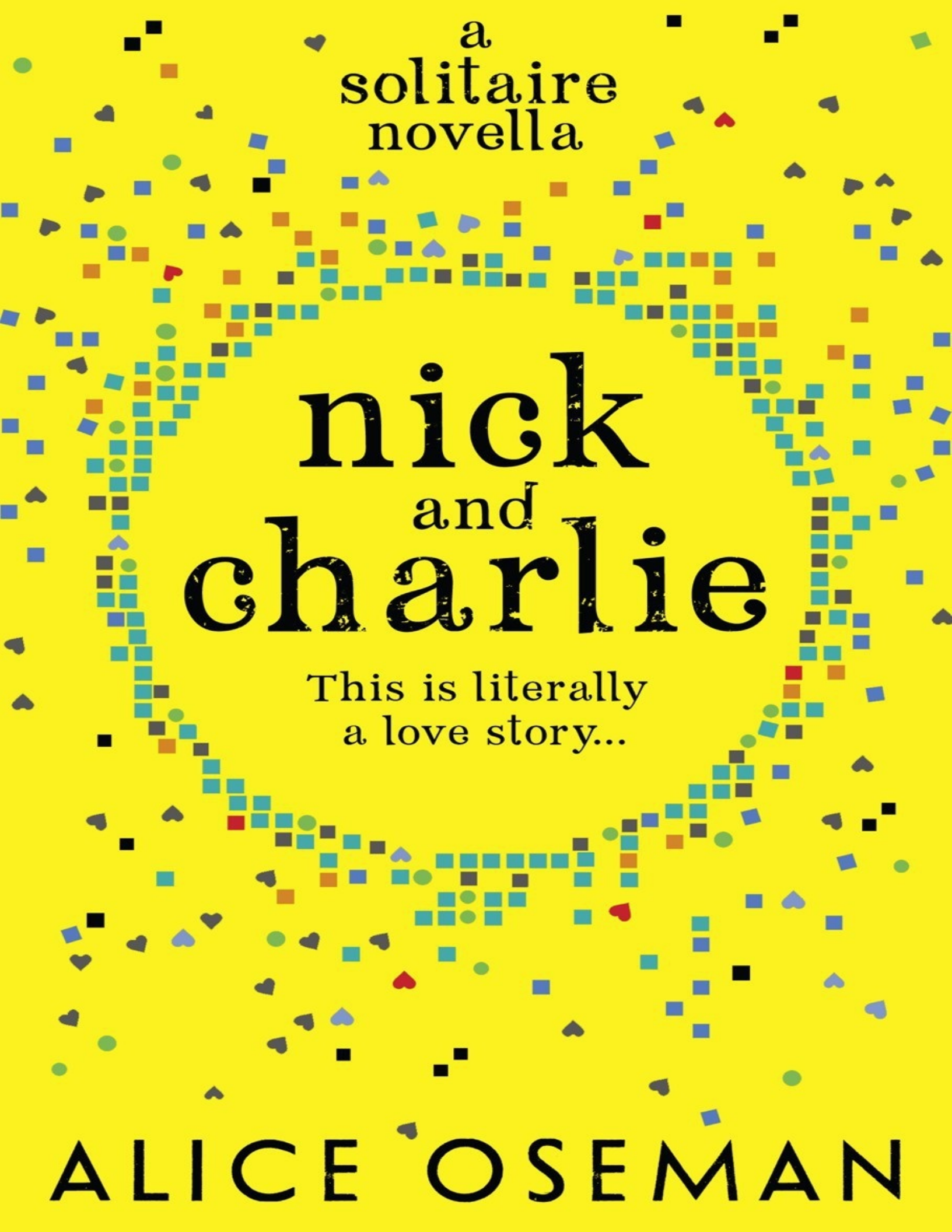




a
solitaire
novella

nick
and
charlie

This is literally
a love story...

ALICE OSEMAN

nick
and
charlie

ALICE OSEMAN

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“Yes, very indifferent indeed,” said Elizabeth, laughingly. “Oh, Jane, take care.”

“My dear Lizzy, you cannot think me so weak, as to be in danger now?”

“I think you are in very great danger of making him as much in love with you as ever.”

- *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen

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ONE

CHARLIE

As Head Boy of Truham Grammar School, I've done many things. I got drunk on the parents' wine at parents' evening. I've been photographed with the mayor three times. I once accidentally made a Year 7 cry.

But none of that was quite as bad as having to stop everyone in Year 13 from enjoying their final day of school, which is what our head teacher, Mr Shannon, is trying to make me do right now.

It's probably worth mentioning that my boyfriend of two years, Nick Nelson, is one of those Year 13s.

"You don't mind, do you?" Mr Shannon leans on the common room table where I'm supposed to be revising for my AS Levels but am actually watching Mac DeMarco concerts on my phone. "It's all got a bit out of hand and I think they'd be more likely to listen to you than me, if you see what I mean."

"Erm..." I shoot at look at my friend Tao Xu who's sitting next to me eating a packet of Galaxy Minstrels. He raises his eyebrows at me as if to say, 'Sucks to be you'.

I don't really want to say yes.

This year, the Year 13's final day of school is *High School Musical*/themed. They hung a giant 'East High School' sign over the Truham sign at the school gate. They've been playing the soundtrack on classroom computers, so wherever you are in the school you can hear a *High School Musical* song playing from somewhere, but you're never quite sure where. They participated in a 'What Time Is It' flash mob on the football field at breaktime. And they have all turned up to school either in red basketball outfits or cheerleader outfits. Disappointingly, Nick went for basketball.

To top it all off, on a non-HSM-related note, they've built a fort out of cardboard boxes on the tennis courts and are having a barbeque inside it.

"I just want them to put the barbeque out," says Shannon, obviously detecting how reluctant I am to walk into a box fort of one hundred and fifty people older than me and

tell them to stop having fun. "You know. Health and safety stuff. If someone gets burnt, I'll be the one dealing with angry parents."

He chuckles. Mr Shannon has come to trust me completely over the several months I have been Head Boy. This is hilarious because I rarely do anything he tells me to do.

Keep the teachers on your side and the students on your side. Don't make enemies or too many friends. That's my advice for getting through school.

"Yeah, sure, no problem," I say.

"You're an absolute life saver." He points a finger at me as he walks away. "Don't revise too hard!"

Tao looks at me, still shoving chocolate into his mouth. "You're not actually gonna go confront the Year 13s, are you?"

I laugh. "Nah. I'll just go see what they're up to and tell them to watch out for Shannon."

My other friend, Aled Last, looks up at me from the opposite side of the table. He's been colour coding his maths revision notes for the past hour. "Can you please get a photo of Harry Greene in a skirt? It's urgent."

I stand up from my chair and put my blazer on. "I think we all need to see that, to be honest."

The Year 12s have already left for study leave and the only reason I'm here is because I revise better at school than at home. Tao and Aled thought the same. None of us really want to be here though. It's the hottest day we've had this year and I just sort of want to lie down somewhere with an ice pack on my head.

Nick and I have plans for this weekend. He's finally free from school, I'm taking a weekend off revision. It's Thursday today; I'm staying over his tonight. Tomorrow night we're going to Harry's party for everyone in sixth form. Saturday we're going to the beach. Sunday we're going to London.

Not that we don't spend every weekend together anyway.

Not that we don't see each other every single day.

If you'd told me three years ago I'd be in a two-year-long relationship by the time I was seventeen, I would have laughed in your face.

"CHARLIE SPRING!"

As I walk through the box fort entrance underneath a banner that says 'WILDCATS!' Harry Greene approaches me, arms outstretched. He is wearing a twelve-year-old's *High*

School Musical cheerleader costume and is exposing a lot more thigh than is probably appropriate for school.

The fort is huge – they’ve taken over two tennis courts. Along with the hilarious amount of cardboard, they’ve also stolen at least ten tables from various classrooms and have a fully functioning barbeque set up in between the two courts. A couple of people are handing out burgers and buns. Vampire Weekend is playing from a wireless speaker in a corner. Most, if not all, of Year 13 are here. It’s a *huge* year group compared to the rest of the school – most of the Higgs girls from that year group moved to Truham after their school burned down.

Harry puts his hands on his hips and grins up at me. “Thoughts?”

Harry Greene, a fairly short guy with very tall hair, is probably the most notorious individual in the entire school, partly due to how many parties he throws and partly due to the fact that he never, ever shuts up.

I raise my eyebrows. “About the fort or about your thighs?”

“Both, mate.”

“Both are great,” I say, deadpan. “Good job. Keep it up.”

Harry steps to one side and lunges. “I knew the skirt was a good decision. I should do this more often.”

“Definitely.”

Still in a lunging position, he asks, “Did Shannon send you? Have you come to shut down our fun?”

“Technically, yes.”

“Are you going to?”

“Obviously not.”

Harry nods. “You’re gonna go far, mate. You’re gonna go far.”

Nick is usually very easy to spot in a crowd, but today almost everyone is wearing red. There are a few people who clearly couldn’t be bothered, one of whom being my sister Victoria, who’s in her black Truham uniform, sitting on the blue asphalt in a corner talking to her friend Rita. But apart from her and a couple of others, everyone blurs into one giant mass of red.

“Nick’s over there.”

I look back at Harry and he’s pointing towards the far left corner, grinning at me. Then he starts walking towards the corner, humming ‘We’re All in This Together’, and I follow him.

“NICK, MATE!” Harry shouts over the crowds of Year 13s, all holding food and red plastic cups and taking photos of each other.

And there he is.

He turns round from a small group of people, a slightly dazed expression on his face as if he's not quite sure whether he's imagining Harry's voice.

I have been going out with Nick Nelson since I was fourteen. He likes rugby and Formula 1, animals (especially dogs), the Marvel universe, the sound felt-tips make on paper, rain, drawing on shoes, Disneyland and minimalism. He also likes me.

His hair is dark blond and his eyes are brown and he is two inches taller than me, if you care about that sort of thing. I think he's pretty hot, but that might just be my opinion.

When he spots us, he waves enthusiastically, and when we finally reach him, he looks at me and says, "All right?"

Nick's *High School Musical* costume consists of a pair of bright red gym shorts and a red tank top. He's pinned a piece of paper to the front with a very badly drawn wildcat on it. If I'm honest, he's had worse outfits.

"You didn't text me back, bitch," I say.

He sips his drink. "I was way too busy getting my head in the game."

Then he holds up a disposable camera and, before I have the chance to smile or make sure I look in any way presentable, takes a photo of me.

A second too late I hold up my hand in front of the camera. "Nick!"

He lets out a loud laugh and starts rewinding the camera before putting it in his pocket. "Another one for the Derp Charlie collection."

"Oh my God."

Harry's already wandered off to talk to another group, so Nick steps a little closer and our hands automatically touch, his hands tapping mine like we're playing a clapping game. "You sticking round here for a bit? Or are you revising?"

I glance round. "I wasn't really revising. I was watching Mac DeMarco concerts."

"Mac DeMarco?" Nick laughs. "I thought you said he was a dickhead."

"He is, but his music's good."

We just sort of stand there for a bit, hands touching, and then Nick brings up a hand to adjust my hair slightly. It hits me suddenly that this is the last day we're going to be at the same school. Six entire years of being at the same school, being in the same place every weekday, are over. The two years we've been a couple at school, two years of eating lunch together, sitting in form, hiding in music rooms, I.T. rooms, P.E. changing rooms, two years of going home together, walking home when it's sunny, getting the bus when it's cold, Nick drawing faces in the window condensation, me falling asleep on his shoulder. It's all over.

Normally we talk about this stuff – stuff that we get sad about or annoyed about or angry about – but Nick’s really excited about uni so I don’t want to start complaining or make him feel bad. I’ve done more than enough of that in my life, for God’s sake. I just . . . I’m the one getting left behind, which is kind of crap, really.

We look up when we hear a small ‘click’ and a loud laugh. We turn and Harry is holding Nick’s camera up to us gleefully. “So bloody romantic. I can’t believe I’m gonna have to find a new couple to cockblock at uni.”

Nick snatches the camera back, but he’s smiling. “Did you just pickpocket me?”

Harry winks and laughs at him before wandering away again. Nick shakes his head and rewinds the camera. “That’s gonna be such an awkward photo.”

“Where’d you get the camera from?”

“I bought it. I thought it’d be good to have some actual physical photos to put on my uni wall instead of just crappy photos on my phone.”

I grab it out of his hands and take a picture of him.

“Hey!” He grabs it back, grinning. “I don’t want pictures of just *me*. Everyone’ll think I’m obsessed with myself.”

I smile too. “I’ll have that one then.”

Nick puts his arm around me. “Okay, we need at least one picture together where we look fucking *normal*.” He holds the camera up in front of us, the lens facing us, and I say, “Let’s be honest, we never look normal,” and Nick laughs at me while I’m making sure my hair isn’t doing something weird, and then we both smile, and he takes the picture.

“When I visit you at uni, I’m expecting that one framed,” I say.

“Only if you buy me a frame. I’ll have rent to pay.”

“God, get a job.”

“What? You mean you’re not going to buy me things now that you have a job? I can’t believe this. Why am I even in this relationship?”

“I don’t even know, Nick. Why are you still here? It’s been over two years.”

Nick just laughs and kisses me quickly on the cheek, then starts to walk backwards away towards the drinks table. “You’re nice to look at.”

I give him the middle finger.

When we first started going out I didn’t really like being too flirty with Nick around school because we’d get a lot of weird looks, particularly from the younger boys. I didn’t really like holding his hand anywhere where people could see us. I even felt kind of awkward just *talking* to him in school, because groups of other boys would look at us like they weren’t quite sure whether they were supposed to be making fun of us or not.

Nowadays the weird looks only make me want to hold his hand even more.

NICK

So I might've cried when the final bell went. Just a little bit.

I wasn't as bad as Harry. He was bawling his eyes out and hugging everyone, including some scared-looking Year 7s who just wanted to catch their bus.

Even though it's not like today was the last time I'd ever see my friends, it still feels sad. Never wearing our uniforms again, no more lunchtime rounders on the field, the end of Wednesday period five biscuit hour in the common room.

No more hanging out with Charlie at school.

I guess there are a few things I'm a bit nervous about. Coming out as bisexual again is probably the main one – it was painful enough the first fifty times. There always seems to be someone who hasn't heard yet or doesn't understand what you're talking about or doesn't believe you until you've repeated yourself. Leaving home's gonna be scary too. I'm a bit worried about my mum being at home by herself all the time.

And, again, there's leaving Charlie behind.

Still, there are loads of good things about leaving school – *God*, I'm ready for university, for doing my own thing whenever I want, for actually learning stuff I'm *interested* in. Finally getting out of this dingy town, having my own place, buying my own food, choosing how to spend my time. It's gonna be ace.

"Harry wants to know whether we'll be at his leavers' party tomorrow," Charlie says from the passenger seat of my car, scrolling through something on his phone. People we know usually message Charlie these days when they want to talk to either of us because I'm horrific at replying to messages. He's way more organised than me.

"Well, I'm still up for it if you are," I say, turning the car out of the school car park.

"Yeah, we should probably go, since prom's going to be crap."

"Fair."

We sit in comfortable silence as I drive us to my house. Charlie picks up his sunglasses from the door compartment and puts them on, then turns the radio on and continues scrolling through his

phone, probably through Tumblr, his knees bent and his feet on the seat. Honestly, it's a beautiful day. Blue skies all round, reflecting off town windows and cars. I roll my window down and turn up the radio, and then I take my disposable camera out of my pocket and quickly take a picture of Charlie, his face all sunlit, his dark hair being blown about by the wind, his body curled up on the passenger seat.

He looks at me instantly, but he's smiling. "*Nick!*"

I grin and look back at the road. "Don't mind me."

"At least give me some warning."

"That's not as fun."

This is normal for us, going to one of our houses after school. We spend more time at my house, generally. As my mum's usually at work and my brother's got his own place now, we have the house to ourselves. Over the past few months, our parents have been letting us stay over each other's houses sometimes, even on school nights. My mum never minds, but Charlie's parents are stricter and Charlie thinks that if he asked more than a couple of times a week, they'd start saying no.

We get that this isn't, like, *normal* normal. We think our parents see it's not normal as well. I mean, don't get me wrong, they're fine with it, but... normal teenage couples don't sleep round each other's houses on school nights, do they? They don't spend every single day with each other, right? I don't know.

We don't care.

Things me and Charlie do together at our houses include:

Play video games. Watch TV and films. Watch YouTube videos. Homework. Coursework. Revision. Nap. Make out. Have sex. Sit in the same room on different laptops in silence. Play board games. Make food. Make drinks. Get drunk. Plan trips to concerts. Plan holidays. Build pillow forts. Have sex in a pillow fort (okay, it was only once, but it did happen, I swear). Play with my dog, Henry. Help Charlie's brother, Oliver, with various Lego projects. Talk. Argue. Shout. Cry. Laugh. Cuddle. Sleep. Text each other from different rooms. Charlie practises his drums, makes playlists, reads books. I take photos on my phone, draw on Charlie when he's not looking, make exotic meals neither of us has tried before.

We're pretty chill. Maybe kind of boring. But, in all honesty, that's fine with both of us.

Today's nothing different. We get in, we get drinks, I change into some jogging bottoms and a sweatshirt. Charlie changes into some jeans and a T-shirt he left here yesterday, and then collapses on to my bed, stretches out on his stomach and opens my laptop.

"D'you want any food?" I ask as I'm about to go downstairs.

I always ask him this after school. Charlie had anorexia pretty badly the year we started going out. He had to go to a psychiatric hospital for a couple of months and it really helped, but I guess he still sort of has it. Stuff like that doesn't go away very quickly. But he's nowhere near as bad as he used to be and he's better in lots of other ways too. He's usually fine with main meals now, even if he doesn't eat snacks, like, ever.

"Nah, I'm good," he says, as usual.

I always make sure to ask though. I think he might say yes one day, if I just keep asking.

Once I've made my way through two slices of toast and a glass of lemonade, I come back upstairs to find Charlie frowning at the laptop screen.

I fall on to my bed next to him. "What's up?"

He glances at me and then back at the laptop before clicking on something. "Nothing. Just reading something on Tumblr."

I don't have Tumblr, despite Charlie trying to make me use it many times. I don't really think it's my sort of thing.

Charlie rolls on to his back to make room for me and takes out his phone. I lie down next to him and pull the laptop towards me. He's already exited Tumblr, so it probably wasn't anything I would have been interested in.

On another tab is the page I started reading this morning about the University of Leeds' rugby team, which I'm gonna try and join when I get there, if I'm good enough.

That's where I'm going in September – the University of Leeds. It's pretty far away; like, two hundred miles or something, and me and Charlie have obviously talked about the fact that we'll be long distance. While it's not ideal and no way near as great as the way we hang out every day at the moment, we're both completely fine with it.

Charlie has a Saturday job at Topman now and they pay pretty well, so he reckons he can get the train to see me every few weeks, and I can get the train back every few weeks, and that means we'll definitely see each other at least every two weeks, if not more. And we'll text and call and Skype all the time anyway.

I start telling Charlie all the facts about Leeds' rugby team – how many tiers there are at the university and whether I think I'll be able to get in (I honestly do, I mean, I'm pretty good at rugby, in my opinion), how much their gym membership is and whether I'll be able to get a job somewhere when I get there, whether it's worth trying to get a sports scholarship, whether I'll be really crap compared to everyone else, and how nice their uniform is (green and white).

Charlie stays still on his back and listens and asks a few questions, but after I've been rambling on for a while I can tell he's getting bored because his voice quietens and he starts fiddling with my sweatshirt sleeve, and then, as I'm in the middle of a sentence, he rolls on to his side and pulls me down by the back of my neck for a kiss, which sort of takes me by surprise because we're long past the stage of needing to make out every time we're alone.

After a few seconds I go to move backwards, but he just pulls me further down. I laugh against his lips and I feel him smile too, but neither of us stop and after a minute or so I feel my hand subconsciously reach to run through his hair. This is a bit of an odd time of day for us to be doing this, but it's difficult to care, especially when he surges forward so he's lying on top of me.

"Did you want to talk about something else?" I murmur, wondering where this has come from. I push his hair back from his forehead. I probably have a thing for Charlie's hair.

He meets my eyes. Then he sits up, leans back and switches on the radio. The Vaccines are playing. He moves back down, tilts his head and says, "Not really," and then his lips are on mine.

CHARLIE

Basically, I hate hearing Nick talk about university.

I'm a horrible person.

He's ridiculously excited about going to uni. And he should be. I'm glad he is.

But lately he's been talking about it *all of the time*. And every single time he mentions it, it just reminds me that we're approaching the end of this. That come September, I'm getting left behind.

Basically, I'm scared.

People keep messaging me on Tumblr about it too and they haven't been helping. I've got quite a lot of followers on Tumblr and many of them are weirdly interested in Nick and I. I think it's probably because we're both boys. Everyone on the Internet's obsessed with same-sex couples. I delete questions about our sex life on literally a daily basis.

So as soon as I mentioned that we'd be long distance from September, I was *flooded* with asks about how I should be prepared for all the horrible things that come with long-distance relationships. And they're pissing me off. I stopped answering them a couple of days ago, but people are still sending them. I don't even understand why all these people care that much to make the effort to send me messages about it.

Thankfully, Nick doesn't mention university for the rest of the day, not when we take his dog Henry for a walk, not during dinner, not while we're watching *Alien*. When he wanders off to have a shower at around ten o'clock, I check my Tumblr inbox again, and there are even *more* now.

Anonymous said:

Have you talked to Nick about what it's gonna be like when he goes away? I know so many couples that tried to make it work when one of them went to uni and they all ended up breaking up. You should really at least talk to him about it.

Anonymous said:

isn't it weird u've been together so long tho??? like 14 is so young to get into a relationship.. u shouldn't feel like u have to stay in ur first relationship forever...

Anonymous said:

Dude long distance never works, trust me it's better to end it now and save yourself the pain

Anonymous said:

Everyone should go into uni single!! University years are your sexiest years!! Gotta bang as many people as you can!!!!

I don't really want to bring this up with Nick because I don't want him to feel *bad* for going to university. He's completely right to be excited about it.

It doesn't matter how I feel about it.

Nick returns from the bathroom in just pyjama shorts, rubbing a towel over his hair.

"What's up?"

"What?"

"You're frowning again."

I quickly close the Tumblr app. "Am I?"

He walks over to the mirror and picks up his hairdryer. "Yep."

"Maybe that's just my face."

"Nah, your face is usually way nicer."

I hurl a pillow in his direction, but he steps to one side to dodge it, laughing.

I can't tell him about this. He'd feel awful. He's had enough of feeling bad because of me. I've already been the most annoying boyfriend in recorded history, what with all my mental health stuff.

"Come take a selfie with me," I say. "I want to piss off my Tumblr followers."

Nick grins and puts down the hairdryer. "Why would that piss them off?"

"Selfies piss everyone off."

"So passive aggressive." He walks over to the bed and flops down next to me.

I open the camera on my phone and before he has the chance to say anything about it, I kiss him on the cheek and take the photo like that.

Nick laughs again. "Oh, you're doing that on the Internet now, are you?"

I wrap my arms around him. "You know it's what they all want."

"At least let me sort out my hair."

"It looks good when it's wet."

We lean our heads together and I make a peace sign with one hand and take another picture. Then I take one of us actually kissing, but I don't put that one on Tumblr. Some things are nicer if they're just for us.

NICK

The next morning I wake up to the sound of Charlie's phone alarm – he always sets it to an annoying un-ignorable beeping sound, rather than music like I do. Despite this, waking up next to Charlie is definitely better than any other way of waking up. I don't really know why. My bed always feels sort of cold when he's not there.

Charlie's still insisting he has to go to school today because he's crap at revising at home, so he's making me get up at seven o'clock in the morning to drive him. While I could go to school to revise, the idea of trying to revise on the first day of my study leave kind of makes me want to burn all of my revision notes, and also we're both crap at doing schoolwork when we're together anyway.

I open my eyes to see him stirring. A line of sunshine falls across his chest through the gap in the curtains, and even while I'm still half-asleep I get another sudden urge to take a picture of him. Then I remember that I used up the film yesterday afternoon, and I already took one of him asleep last night anyway, when I found him curled up in my bed after I'd gone to get a glass of water.

Charlie rolls over to turn off the alarm and then goes to climb over me to get out of bed – my bed's situated against the wall – but as he does I slide my hands round his waist and pull him down on top of me. He lets out a surprised noise and then a small laugh, his voice still sleepy. "I have to go shower—"

"No, stay here."

"I can't, I'll fall asleep again."

"Don't go to school."

"Nick!"

"Stay here with me."

"I can't, I've got to... I need to revise."

"Mm, fine." I loosen my arms so Charlie can wrestle himself out of them. As soon as he's gone, my bed feels cold and empty again. It's pretty dumb, really. I sleep alone most of the time.

TWO

CHARLIE

I sort of hoped Nick might have picked up on how I've been feeling. Normally he's pretty good at that; like, *weirdly* good, actually. And I'm not exactly subtle in my attempts to get him to stop talking about uni. But by third period, after I text Nick to see whether he's awake again (after dropping me off at school, he said he was going back to bed), the excited text onslaught begins.

Nick Nelson

(11:34) We should go uni shopping soon!!! Is it weird I'm excited about buying kitchen utensils?

Nick Nelson

(12:02) Dyou think I should email to check whether I'll have a double bed?? Like how do people know which sheets to buy?

(12:05) I'd better have a double bed lol your bed is bad enough

Nick Nelson

(12:46) Dyou think I should take my xbox or is that too unsociable? I need people to like me

Nick Nelson

(12:54) Is Kaleem in school?? If he is can you ask him whether he knows about the beds?

Nick Nelson

(13:15) I'm way more interested in home furnishing than I thought.. the ikea website is a dangerous vortex

I reply to all his messages and really try to be enthusiastic, but I can tell my texts sound a bit flat. Nick doesn't seem to notice though. He just keeps texting me about university and buying stuff for his room and the modules he thinks he wants to take and all sorts of other things that just make me feel increasingly more awful by the second.

We've talked about it before. Quite a while ago, actually, back when Nick was looking round universities last summer and when he was applying to them in the autumn. I admitted I was pretty worried about him leaving. I said I was scared of being on my own all the time. It was kind of embarrassing, really. Stupid. *Scared of being on my own*. I sounded like I was three-years-old.

Nick obviously reassured me we'd talk all the time anyway and everything would be fine. We haven't talked about it much since then, but only because there's not much more to say about it.

Everything is going to be fine.

I sit in the common room and listen to Muse's 'Origin of Symmetry' album on repeat and focus on my classics revision, trying to memorise some Latin vocab, getting Aled to test me every now and then, since he's the only one of my friends in school today. I just need to stop thinking about it all. Everything's fine. I'm worrying about nothing.

After lunch, after I've failed for the third time to remember what 'latrocinium' means (fraud or robbery), Aled puts down my pack of cue cards and looks at me. Aled Last doesn't have a load of friends – he's extremely shy so not many people try to talk to him – but I'd say he and Tao were two of my best.

"Ugh, sorry," I say immediately. "Wow. I need to revise more. God."

Aled blinks at me, and then glances out the window. It's another intensely sunny day. I probably should have just stayed in bed with Nick this morning.

"Maybe we should stop revising now," he says in his tiny voice. He chuckles and looks down at his own revision – more colourful maths cue cards. "Not that I've been doing much anyway."

"Haha, yeah, same."

"You okay though?" he asks. "I feel like you've been really down today."

I pause, a little taken aback. "Oh. Yeah. No. I'm fine."

"Yeah?" He fiddles with his fingers and gives me a look.

"Yeah. I don't know. Nick's just talking a lot about uni, it's kind of. . . just makes me feel a bit crap. . . I don't know." I groan and run a hand through my hair. "That sounds so bad when I say it out loud."

"No, you're allowed to feel things." He smiles. "I get it."

"It's not really fair on him though; like, he has a right to be excited."

"Maybe you should talk to him about it. You've already talked about long distance and stuff, right?"

"Yeah, we've talked about it. . . I just don't think he realises how much it's. . ." I don't really know how to finish my sentence. "It'll make him feel so bad though." I shake my head. "I don't want him to stop being excited about it."

"Well. . ." Aled struggles to find something to say. He looks down at his desk and fiddles with his cue cards. "I don't think you've got anything to be worried about. I mean, you know, you're. . . you're Nick and Charlie. You're not going to break up. . . I don't think. . . I mean, even Elle and Tao aren't breaking up and you know what they're like."

Tao's been going out with Elle Argent, a girl from Nick's year, for almost the same amount of time Nick and I have been going out. They do seem to argue a lot but this is only because they're practically the same person.

"Yeah."

Aled doesn't say anything else, so I stand up and say I'm going to the bathroom. But I don't go to the bathroom. I walk all the way down to the locker room, just so I can lean against a wall in a locker row and take out my phone and try and think of something to say to Nick, *some way* of telling him what I'm feeling. But there isn't any way to say it, not without making him feel guilty. And that's the last thing I want.

Instead, I load up my Tumblr inbox, just to see if there's anything interesting in there, but there are only a few new messages asking whether I'd thought properly about how long distance works, about whether it's really worth the pain, about whether Nick's really not going to meet anyone else at university while I'm not with him all the time. I don't mean to let this stuff get to me, but it still does. I even feel myself start to well up a bit, so I exit the Tumblr app and delete it from my phone.

We're fine. Why am I getting upset about this now?

NICK

When Charlie slumps into my car at 3:15pm, I can tell something's up. I say hi but all I get is a tiny grumble in response, and as soon as he shuts the door he leans on the window and closes his eyes.

I stay still for a moment, waiting to see if he's going to say anything. But he doesn't. "You okay?"

"Mm," he says, unmoving.

“Bad day?”

“Mm.”

I drive off without pushing it. If he wants to talk about it, he will. That’s one thing I’ve learnt about Charlie. If you try and make him talk about stuff he doesn’t want to talk about, there’s even less of a chance he’ll eventually tell you.

By the time we get to Charlie’s house he seems a bit better, so I don’t bring it up. But something’s still kind of *off* with him. He sits on his laptop in intense silence while I’m catching up with his mum. He spends at least half an hour choosing what to wear for Harry’s party, even though he wears the same jeans and checked shirts everywhere anyway. It takes him significantly longer than normal to eat dinner, which is always a sign he’s stressed about something. In the car on the way to Harry’s house, his knees bob up and down.

Maybe he’s pissed off at me for some reason. I have no idea why he would be.

We park down the road and he walks a little way ahead of me and Tori, Charlie’s sister, who we gave a lift to.

“Have you argued?” Tori asks. “Seems like he’s pissed off with you.”

“Not that I know of. I don’t know what’s wrong.”

“Hm.” She doesn’t say anything else.

Harry Greene lives in a townhouse near the high street. His massive parties are pretty much the main reason he’s the most famous guy at Truham. We know that by eleven almost everyone will be in the basement dancing to some crappy dubstep remixes. By twelve, people will be throwing up in house-plant pots and on the pavement outside. By two, people will be asleep in corridors, breaking away into different rooms to mess around, getting high in the garden.

And sure enough, Harry’s got music blasting from the basement making the floor vibrate and there are people everywhere, mostly Truham sixth formers, but definitely a few Year 10s and 11s too, and people from the secondary school across town. I think we were all supposed to be in the garden, but it’s absolutely chucking it down with rain. So much for summer.

As soon as we're inside and Tori's gone off to find her friends, Charlie speed-walks towards the kitchen for drinks. The kitchen table, as expected, is covered in bottles and plastic cups, and once we reach it Charlie downs a vodka shot, and then another one. I think this might be the point where I need to actually say something.

I touch his arm. "Hey."

He looks at me and takes a sip of the vodka lemonade he just made. "Hm?"

"You okay?"

He nods a little too enthusiastically. "Yeah. Fine. Why?"

I shake my head. "You just seem sort of on edge."

He looks away again and pours a drop more vodka into his drink. "Oh. Just... a bit stressed because of revision... just been in a bad mood today..."

This seems like a reasonable explanation, I guess. Then again, Charlie could lie for Britain – he lies to *loads* of people. He lied to people at school for months about his anorexia. He lies to his parents sometimes when he wants to go out somewhere with me but isn't sure they'd let him. He lies to Mr Shannon to avoid becoming unpopular with other students. To be fair, he hardly ever lies to me, but occasionally I can tell that he's saying something just because he doesn't want to bother me. I think this might be one of those times.

He takes another sip. His eyes dart around the room. "Best Coast," he says.

"What?"

"The music. It's Best Coast."

I hadn't even clocked that there was music playing in here. I try to think of something to say but he beats me to it.

"We should get drunk."

I chuckle. "I'm driving."

"Oh. That's boring."

"You get drunk."

"I plan to."

"D'you think we should actually socialise first?"

He pours a glass of lemonade and hands it to me. "Mm, fine." He steps close to me, so close I almost think he's going to go in for a kiss right here in front of the people chatting and drinking around us,

but instead he just gazes up at me beneath dark hair with icy eyes, smirking slightly, the tease of a dimple in one cheek, letting loose everything that made me physically attracted to him in the first place. I'm half confused and half extremely aroused.

"Nick," he says, so low and quiet I probably wouldn't have heard it had I not been staring at his lips.

I let out a nervous laugh but don't really know what to say. We're not exactly averse to public displays of affection, but we're never like *this* when other people are around. What is he trying to do?

"I want a drunk hook up in the bathroom later," he murmurs, and then he walks off before I have the chance to answer him.

CHARLIE

I am aware that I am combatting my feelings about Nick going to university by a) refusing to talk about it and b) flirting with him so hard it's actually embarrassing, but honestly, I'm *this close* to punching the next person who even uses the word 'university' in a sentence. I have not punched anyone yet in my life, but it's never too late to start.

Oh, and c) I am getting drunk.

Very drunk.

It doesn't take a lot to get me drunk, which is extremely useful for situations like this, where Year 13s are everywhere and no one will shut up about leaving school and prom and summer and university and I just want to *go home*.

I stay away from Nick as much as possible because hearing him talk about it is the worst part of all of it.

I am a terrible person.

It's eleven o'clock now and I've lost count of how many vodka-lemonades I've had, and I'm having to stay seated on an armchair next to Tao in the conservatory because standing up is proving quite difficult at the moment. There isn't really enough room for both of us on the armchair and my leg is sort of going numb because Tao is slightly sitting on it, but he's too engrossed in talking about something or other, I don't know, I'm not really paying attention—

"Have you and Nick talked about it?" he says, snapping me out of my daze, but it's still like I've got cotton wool in my ears and nothing that's happening is actually happening.

"What? I wasn't listening."

Tao grins at me. He always seems more like his eccentric self when we're outside of school. Tonight he's wearing a stripy shirt that was probably intended for a significantly overweight businessman, with rolled-up green trousers and his signature red beanie. He genuinely does think he belongs in a Wes Anderson film.

He throws his arms around me and rests his head on mine. "Aw, you're such an adorable lightweight. I'm glad we're not leaving school this year."

"If one more person mentions leaving school, I'm literally going to cry."

He pats my cheek. "There, there. It'll all be fine. You're Nick and Charlie, aren't you?"

"I don't know what that means," I say.

NICK

Everyone is talking about uni.

I don't think I've ever been so excited for something, or so *ready*. And everyone else going to uni seems to agree. It's the start of freedom. Doing things because we *chose* to do them. Finally being treated as *adults*.

But I get that, like, Charlie might not want to talk about it all the time. I mean, he's still got a year of school left.

But it gets to eleven and Charlie is definitely avoiding me. Normally we stick pretty close together at parties, and considering how he was acting earlier... well, I'm a bit confused, if I'm honest.

I find him curled up in an armchair with his friend, Tao. I say hi to Tao and exchange pleasantries but can see Charlie staring at me. I crouch down next to the armchair so our eyes are level. His are unfocused and he's blinking a lot – he's pissed, all right. "You okay?"

"I'm *fine*," he snaps, with an irritated grin. "God, you don't need to, like, check up on me every second, Jesus Christ."

I feel myself recoil. Charlie hasn't snapped at me like that for *months*. What the hell have I done?

I stand up again. "All right. Fine. No need to shout at me."

He looks away. "I wasn't shouting."

"Yeah." I turn around and go to leave the conservatory, but not fast enough that I don't hear Tao say to Charlie, "What's going on?"

CHARLIE

It's midnight and I'm in the basement, where almost everyone's come to dance, hoping that the blast of dubstep, some crappy remix of a Daft Punk song, will drown out the buzzing in my brain, but it doesn't. I can't stop thinking I'm a piece of shit, I'm the worst boyfriend in the entire universe. I lean against the wall but just end up sliding down it so I'm sitting on the floor, all the dancers blurring in front of me under Harry's flashing fairy lights. Why am I being so weird and angry? Why am I like this?

"Charlie!" shouts a voice over the music, not Nick's, and I look up and there's Aled, gazing down awkwardly in his burgundy jumper. He squats down next to me. "Are you all right?"

I swallow, so close to saying no. No, I'm ridiculous, I'm hilariously un-all-right. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine."

"You don't look all right." Aled frowns. "Did you... is this because of Elle and Tao?"

Maybe I'm just hallucinating conversations now, maybe my brain is just stringing random words together. "What? What d'you mean?"

"I just thought... you know... what I said about Elle and Tao yesterday... like... it was stupid, I feel really bad..."

I shake my head, wanting to laugh. "What the fuck are you talking about, Aled?"

"You know... Elle and Tao breaking up."

I spring forwards from the wall. "*What?*"

Aled's eyes widen. "Oh, oh, God, I just assumed you would know by now. They just decided that they're breaking up at the end of summer, I just heard..."

I stare at him.

"*What?*"

Aled looks down. "Yeah... Tao was just like, *yeah, we're gonna keep on going out until Elle leaves but we think long distance will be too hard and Elle wants a fresh start at uni.*"

"But, Tao didn't tell me... I was talking to him earlier... I don't..."

Aled says nothing.

I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. Why would anyone just end a relationship because it's got to go long distance for a bit? Elle and Tao clearly like each other a lot. They're practically the same person, for God's sake.

Why would anyone do that?

Nick and I aren't going to do that. Nick doesn't want a 'fresh start'. He thinks long distance will be fine. He doesn't want to break up with me.

Doesn't he?

Does he?

Does he want to break up with me?

"Oh God, Charlie, what's..." Aled's started speaking because I've started crying. Great.

"Sorry..." I say, but my voice definitely isn't audible above the deafening music and I'm not sure who I'm apologising to anyway. "Sorry... I'm so sorry..."

NICK

Since I haven't seen Charlie for half an hour, I think now might be a good time to go looking for him again, even if he is in a mood with me. What is his *deal* though? He's actually starting to piss me off a bit now. I've done nothing for him to be in a mood with me about.

I find him in the basement and he's just sitting in a corner with his friend Aled, so I go over to him, hoping that his weird bad mood has gone away, but as I barge through the dancers, getting closer and closer, I start to realise that his cheeks are damp and he's been *crying*, and that's when I start to feel seriously concerned.

Something's definitely wrong.

I kneel down next to him and Aled gives me this panicked look like he doesn't know what to do. Charlie rolls his head towards me and he's even drunker than earlier, if that's possible. No wonder he's sitting on the floor in the basement.

"What's wrong?" I shout over the music.

He laughs but it looks wrong, something is really wrong. "Are you gonna start talking about university again?"

"What?"

"It's pissing me off so much, Nick."

I squint at him and ask, "Pissing you off?" but he just mumbles something in reply and I can't hear him properly.

Then he pulls me roughly towards him with one arm and kisses me.

I quickly discover drunk kisses are not fun when one person is sober. Despite this, he tries to deepen the kiss. I can feel the dampness of his cheeks and he tastes of alcohol. It takes a few

seconds for me to actually realise what's happening and in that time, I blink and see Aled make a look of startled distress, stand up and walk away.

I gently push Charlie off me. "Don't."

"*Niiick*." Charlie tries to lean forward again but I just lean backwards. "You promised."

"Charlie, you're acting really weird."

"No I'm not."

"Yes, *you are*." I pull him by the arm so we're both standing. He staggers and grabs on to my arm with both hands. "Come on, let's go upstairs."

He doesn't answer, so I lead him back through the dancers and back upstairs, where it's nearly empty now – almost everyone is dancing in the basement. I guide him to the conservatory which is, as I'd hoped, empty and quiet, apart from the rain that's pummelling against the glass roof.

I sit him down on the armchair again and crouch down in front of him. "What's going on?"

He doesn't look at me, or even seem to have heard me.

"*Charles*." I say this a little louder and this time he meets my eyes. "Why are you acting like this?"

"What?" he snaps, shaking his head. "What am I *acting like*?"

"Like one minute you're seriously pissed off with me and the next you want to get off with me!"

He bends over and puts his head in his hands. "I feel sick."

"For fuck's sake." I stand up. This is hopeless. "Why are you being such a *dick*?"

He doesn't move.

"Just *talk to me*!" I say.

He says nothing.

"You can't be angry at me if you can't even tell me what I'm doing wrong!"

He makes a groaning noise and shakes his head in his hands.

"Fucking *hell*," I say, sitting down heavily on the sofa opposite. "Well I don't fucking know what to do then."

"Stop shouting at me," he mumbles from behind his hands.

"I'm not shouting at you!"

"You *are*."

We sit in silence for a minute until a particularly loud thunder crash makes me jump. Charlie notices and raises his head.

"You can break up with me if you want," he says.

It takes a few seconds to process that.

"What?" I say. I stand up again and feel myself *really* getting angry now. What is he *talking* about? Where the hell has this *come from*?

"What the *fuck* are you talking about?"

"If you... want a fresh start, or... something... if you're bored..."

His eyes are unfocused again, his words slurring. Lightning flashes overhead, brightening the room. Why is he saying these things?

"What? Is that what *you* want?" I huff out a laugh. This can't be happening. "You want us to break up. Is that it?"

"I just... want you to be... happy..."

"Bullshit," I spit out, my voice definitely too loud now.

"Elle and Tao are breaking up..."

"What, so we need to break up too? You're not even going to *try* to stay in a relationship with me?" Part of me wants to talk this out rationally, but most of me is just pure *anger* and I don't even know why. I think I'm just tired of all this. Tired of all this bullshit and all this university talk and remembering that I've only got a few months left with Charlie...

"Why are you saying these things, Charlie? If you're trying to break up with me, just fucking spit it out."

But I don't want him to. I feel like I'm about to be sick.

Charlie just shakes his head and stares blankly at the space next to me.

"Is that why you've been acting like this?" I say. "You want to break up with me, but you're not even fucking brave enough to say it? You want to force me to break up with you instead?"

He's crying again now, his head shaking from side to side and his knees bobbing up and down. But he doesn't say anything. He doesn't deny it.

"Well fuck you then," I say, and that's when I realise that I'm crying too. God, how long's it been since that happened?

And then he raises his head and full on shouts at me. "Well it's *me* who's getting left behind!" He points towards somewhere

indeterminable outside and his voice breaks. “You’re fucking off to university where you’ll meet loads of new people and it’s *me* who’s getting *left behind*. We keep being like, *oh, everything’s going to be fine, we’ll Skype all the time, blah blah blah*, but it’s *not* going to be all right, is it?” He gestures wildly, his eyes darting around the room. “It’s *not* going to be all right, it’s going to be *crap* for me. I’m going to be stuck in this shitty town all by myself, but here you are, talking about it like it’s the fucking *best thing ever*, and you know what? It makes me feel like *shit*. It’s like you’re looking forward to getting rid of me, like you can’t *wait* to finally get out of here and get away from me—”

“What the *fuck*?!” I shout back, running a hand through my hair. “What d’you want me to do?! *Not* go to university?”

“*No!*”

“Because that sounds like what you’re saying.”

“I’m not—”

“You’ve got *no fucking right* to be annoyed with me about that. I’m a year older than you, I’m going to university in September. That’s just the way it is.”

He stares at me, eyes wide and filled with tears, and then he looks down. “Why are you being like this?”

“Mate, what the fuck am I *being like*?”

Charlie looks up again and when he moves his hand, his eyes are thin slits.

“Don’t call me *mate*. You never call me *mate*.”

I just shake my head and let out a huff of exasperation. “You really are being a proper dickhead tonight, aren’t you?”

“*Just leave, then!*” he shouts. The rain falls harder than ever – I can barely hear him over the noise. “Fuck off, then!”

“Yeah, fine. No problem.”

And that’s it. I walk out of the room.

Standing in the corridor is Tao Xu, who has probably heard every word. God, this is all his and Elle’s fault. If they hadn’t fucking broken up in the first place, Charlie wouldn’t... he wouldn’t want to... he wouldn’t have thought he’d...

“Is he... are you okay?” Tao stutters. He’s always been a weasely little prick, with his stupid beanies and stupid shirts. I’ve never liked

him.

“See what you’ve done?” I say, stepping past him. “Fuck you.” He cowers back. I want to say something else to him, but I can’t think of anything, my mind’s gone blank, I’m still processing what’s just happened. What *has* happened? Everything was fine yesterday. This can’t be the end. This can’t possibly be the end.

I barge through the people chatting and smiling and laughing in the living room until I’m out of the house and in the rain, and by the time I reach my car I’m soaked and shivering. I turn the engine on but I just end up sitting in my car for twenty minutes, maybe because I’m too scared to drive when I can still hear thunder in the distance, or maybe because I’m hoping Charlie’s going to run out the house and open the door and say that everything he’d said was a drunken mistake. But he doesn’t. So I just sit there.

THREE

CHARLIE

I wake up because the sun is in my eyes – I forgot to close my curtains last night. I forgot to do a lot of things last night. Like be a decent human being.

I fumble for my phone before realising it's still in my back pocket, and I'm still in my clothes. It's quarter past ten in the morning. No texts, no Facebook messages, nothing. I don't want to get out of bed to change. I don't want to do anything.

Last night. . .

What was I even *thinking*?

The Elle and Tao thing freaked me out. That after all this time, they'd just be, like, 'Cool. Yeah. We're breaking up. Oh well.'

After *two years*. Didn't they. . . didn't they *love each other*?

No. Clearly not. They were bored.

And I guess I started to think, 'What if Nick's bored?'

We don't do many exciting things. We just sit around at each other's houses.

I'm pretty boring as a person.

So, I guess I wanted to test him, to check whether he wanted to break up, but I couldn't even *say* it. I couldn't even say it properly.

Stupid.

I'm stupid.

I'm a fucking stupid idiot.

I'd rather not have known. I'd rather have just carried on in blissful ignorance of what he thought, rather than this absolute mess. Now I have no idea what he's thinking. Is he just angry at me, or does he actually want to break up?

The thought of texting him to find out makes me feel physically ill.

We've argued before, but nothing quite as bad as this. We've never woken up still angry at each other. I haven't woken up feeling this shit in a long time, hungover and wanting to be sick and wanting to cry and that familiar emptiness I thought I'd gotten rid

of a long time ago. That feeling that makes me want to stay in bed and never get up again.

One time back when I was in Year 11, a few weeks after I got out of the hospital, Nick said something he didn't mean while we were eating dinner – some stupid thing about how I wasn't trying hard enough – and I started having a go at him and it turned into a massive argument, ending with him leaving. But even then, he still came back a few hours later. And everything was okay again. I think that might have been the first time we slept in the same bed, actually.

I roll over so I'm out of the sun and pull my covers over my head, but the birds tweeting outside are too loud and it's still too bright in my room, so I just end up lying there. I wish I could turn back time. I wish I could keep turning back time to Thursday, and every time I got to the end of Thursday, I'd rewind time to the beginning of Thursday again, and I'd just be with Nick every day for the rest of my life.

Can't believe I even think stuff like this. Pathetic. I'm so pathetic.

"Morning," says my sister Victoria when I slump down next to her on the lounge sofa. She's in her pyjamas and dressing gown and is watching *Bridesmaids* with a large bag of Kettle Chips on her lap.

"Morning. Why are you watching a film at eleven o'clock in the morning?"

"Why not?"

"Why Kettle Chips?"

"First day of study leave treat."

"It's your second day of study leave."

"Then . . . it's my second day of study leave treat."

I laugh and watch the film with her for a few minutes. I never really got into this film, but Victoria's weirdly obsessed with it. It might be because the main character is super sarcastic, just like her.

"So . . . you feeling okay?" She turns to me. "Have you had breakfast?"

"Feel a bit sick. It's nearly lunchtime anyway."

"Hm." She doesn't comment. Normally Victoria's the first one to make me eat when I don't want to. "What happened to Nick last night? You're lucky Becky had her car. And why were you drunk and crying in the conservatory?"

I groan and roll my head back against the sofa. "Do we have to talk about it?"

She shrugs and looks back at the screen. "Nope. Thought you might want to."

We sit in silence for a minute.

And then I decide to tell her.

I tell her the full story, not that there's much to tell anyway. Nick's constantly talking about university, me getting all anxious about it, hearing about Elle and Tao, getting scared, saying stuff I shouldn't have, Nick freaking out – everything is my fault, as usual.

"Jesus," she says, once I've finished. She gazes at me, the remains of her eyeliner smeared under her eyes, and then she pauses the film. "Sounds like a really bad argument."

"Yeah, no shit."

"You don't think he wants to break up, do you?"

"Well, I don't know. Maybe. He didn't say *no I don't want to break up*, you know? He just... got so angry..." And then suddenly I feel tears in my eyes. I bring up a hand to cover my face and when I speak, my voice is all high-pitched and wobbly. "I feel like shit."

"Oh, Charlie." Victoria puts down her crisps and pulls me into a hug, running one hand over my back. "It's okay."

I shake my head into her shoulder, trying not to get tears all over her dressing gown. "It's not okay... it's really not okay..."

She lets me cry into her shoulder for a few minutes before she speaks again.

"I think you need to talk to him."

"I don't know what to say," I whisper.

"Just something. Anything."

"He hates me."

"That's untrue."

"He's angry."

"That's temporary."

"I don't know what to *say*."

"It doesn't matter what you say," she says. "You just have to say something."

NICK

Saturday is a nothing day. I get up at around ten. I take Henry for a walk. I eat. I have a nap. I play with Henry in the living room. I play video games for five hours. I eat again. I nap again. I go on YouTube for four hours. I discover that I've lost my disposable camera. I spend an hour looking for it. And then I cry myself to sleep.

On Sunday morning I stay in bed. I start to realise that the reason I feel numb is because I'm in shock. In shock that Charlie would even suggest breaking up. I also start to realise that the shock is turning into panic, I'm panicking now, panicking that long distance really isn't going to work after all, that it's going to be too hard. If Charlie's this upset now, he'll be even worse when I leave. But I can't stay here just because he's upset about it. What am I supposed to do? There's nothing I can do. Nothing. It is what it is. Charlie wants to break up with me before it gets too painful. Maybe we'd end up breaking up anyway. Maybe we're just getting it out of the way.

What? I don't know. I have no idea what I think any more.

I go to text Charlie but then realise I can't because I don't know what to say. I can't speak to him until I actually understand what I feel.

I start crying again.

Mum asks me what's wrong on Sunday afternoon. I tell her me and Charlie had an argument.

"Oh, you two'll get that patched up though, won't you, love?" she says, and then leaves the kitchen before I have the chance to say: not necessarily. Maybe not. Maybe this is it.

CHARLIE

Wednesday arrives and I still haven't done anything and neither has Nick. I guess I hoped if I waited long enough, he'd be the one to text me first, or call me, or *something*. But there's nothing.

Honestly, I have no idea what he's thinking. Maybe he really *does* want to break up. Why else would he have just lost it at me? He's never been so angry with me before. God, I wouldn't blame him if he wanted to break up. I'm pathetic.

I try to distract myself with revision, but it doesn't really work. My Thursday Latin language exam rolls around and it goes fine. I memorised all the vocab in the end; there's nothing I'll let stop me from doing my best in my exams. But I don't feel happy when it's over. I just check my phone for the six hundred billionth time. And there's nothing, of course. Nothing.

I know I should text him, but if I ask whether he really does want to break up and he says yes, I don't know what I'll do.

What's the point of a life without Nick?

Wow. I'm so embarrassing.

If he wants to talk to me, he will. If he doesn't then I guess that's it.

That's the end.

NICK

Nine days since the party. A Sunday. I messed up my psychology exam on Friday, but I don't think that was because of our argument. Everyone knows psychology A Level came straight out of hell.

I've got a few days until my next exam so I don't do anything again this weekend. I don't even take Henry for a walk; I ask Mum to do it. I just sit in my room, curtains shut, playing video games, watching TV, doing nothing.

Mum walks in at around 1pm to ask if I want lunch, but stops when she sees me wrapped up like a burrito in my duvet, my hair greasy and a property show on the TV.

She sits down on the bed. "You all right, Nicky?"

"Mmm."

"How's Charlie? I haven't seen him for a few days."

I blink slowly and look at her.

"We argued."

"That was a while back though, wasn't it, love?"

"Nine days."

"And you still haven't sorted it out?"

"No."

"Oh, baby." She pats what she thinks is my leg but is actually just a bit of lumpy duvet. "Have you tried talking to him?"

"He broke up with me."

"What? Are you sure? That doesn't sound like him."

"Yes."

She breathes out. "Oh, baby. I'm so sorry." She holds out her arms for a hug and I sort of fall into them, still in my duvet-burrito form. "It'll

be okay. You'll be all right."

It takes quite a lot of effort not to start crying again.

"D'you want to order pizza tonight?" she asks. "Special treat."

I nod. "Yes please."

"I love you so much, baby. You'll be okay."

"Love you, Mum."

But I don't think I'll be okay. Ever. I don't think I'll ever be okay ever again.

FOUR

CHARLIE

Two weeks after the argument is my penultimate exam – music. A Friday. I don't think about anything except my exams for the entire week. Well, except the fact that I can't remember the last time I spent two *days* away from Nick, let alone two entire weeks. God.

Do I need to start trying to get over this? Because I have no idea how people do that. Nick is the best and most important person I have ever met.

God.

I go out with my friends that evening, just to Simply Italian for a big end-of-exams celebration meal, even though my last exam isn't until next Thursday. I try to have fun and laugh at people's jokes and talk about how horrible exams were, but everything's fake. I don't want to laugh at anything. I want to go home and sit in bed and do nothing.

I'm sitting next to Aled and he stays quiet for most of the evening, as he does. But as we're all sorting out who's paying what, he says, "Charlie," and I look at him, and I see genuine concern in his eyes.

"Have you spoken to Nick at all?" he asks.

Word of our argument has spread everywhere, obviously.

"No," I say, trying to keep any and all emotion out of my voice.

"So . . . is that it, then?" His voice is almost a whisper. "Have you, erm, broken up?"

"Yeah." I realise that this is the first time I've said it. I've been distracting myself up until this point, but now I don't have revision to distract me any more. And there it is. We've broken up. "Yeah, I, erm . . . I think so."

Aled looks at me for a long moment. "I'm so sorry."

"Not your fault."

"No, but –" he shakes his head – "you're Nick and Charlie."

I laugh. "What does that *mean*?"

"It's . . ." He laughs too, a nervous expulsion of air. "You're . . . it's hard to explain. It's like, if you had to provide evidence for soul mates, everyone would pick you two."

I snort. "There's no such thing as soul mates."

"Maybe. But you two present a pretty convincing argument."

"If we were, he wouldn't have broken up with me."

"Is that actually what happened?"

I stare at Aled. I've never heard him so assertive. I don't know how to answer.

"Did he actually say, *Charlie, I want to break up with you?*"

I frown. "Well, no, not exactly. But, he didn't say *I don't want to break up.*"

"But obviously he wouldn't have said that."

"What?"

"If he thought you were trying to break up with him, he's not going to start protesting against it. If he thought you didn't love him any more, he wouldn't make it difficult for you. He'd just be heartbroken."

"Well, he's an idiot then!"

Aled laughs. "Exactly. Two idiots in love. Couple goals."

"Great. Thanks."

Someone interrupts us to see whether Aled's sorted out what money he owes. I really want to believe what he's saying. That Nick never wanted to break up.

As soon as I get home, I sit down at the breakfast bar where Victoria is sitting with her laptop and a large glass of diet lemonade. She turns to me.

"You look at least two hundred percent more cheerful than you have been collectively in the past two weeks," she says.

"I need to talk to Nick, like, *soon*."

She throws her hands into the air. "Jesus Christ! Finally! Revelation of the century!"

I swivel on the stool. "But also, I really don't want to."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You've had your tantrum time, okay? You're a Year 13 now."

"Not till September."

"I always count it from the last day of the year before."

"Well I don't."

She takes a long sip of lemonade and then points violently at the door. "Go talk to him, you giant child!"

"Oh my God, *fine!*"

I get up from the breakfast bar and wander towards the door, but Victoria speaks just as I'm about to leave.

“By the way, I found this stuffed between the sofa cushions.” She picks up something next to her and holds out Nick’s disposable camera. “Is it yours?”

I take it from her. “Oh, that’s Nick’s.”

“Oh. He might want it back then.”

“Yeah.” I walk slowly out of the room. The number on the tiny screen at the back is at zero – I didn’t even know Nick had taken that many pictures. When did he take them all? He could only have left the camera here two weeks ago while we were getting ready for the party, and I didn’t see him take any then. So it must have been the day before that.

And that’s when I know exactly what I’m going to do.

Straight after my shift at Topman on Saturday morning, I speed-walk to Boots to get the camera developed.

I have absolutely no idea what’s on it, but I figure there might be something I can send Nick. I don’t know whether that’ll help anything. But a picture speaks a thousand words, I guess. Blah blah blah, something cheesy and romantic. Yep. Cool.

I arrive at Boots and turns out I have to wait an hour for them to develop the photos, so I wander around town with my umbrella over my head. I buy an Oreo Dairy Milk bar from a newsagent’s because Nick’s obsessed with them. Then I sit down on a bench and take out my phone, balancing my umbrella on my shoulder.

And then I see I have a text from Tao.

I open it immediately.

Tao Xu

(15:34) Hey Charlie, I know we haven’t really talked about the Nick thing... and I’m sorry I didn’t tell you personally about me and Elle, like... I was having a hard time dealing with it myself tbh. Just wanted to say I’m so sorry if me and Elle caused some weird drama between you and Nick and I really hope it’s cool between you guys soon, and if this is at all helpful I saw Nick quickly as he was leaving Harry’s and he was really upset about it... like I’m pretty sure there’s no way he wants to actually break up with you.

I read the message several times before replying.

Charlie Spring

(15:52) hey! sorry, it's definitely not your fault... i'll keep you updated on the nick thing... i don't really want to break up either haha

And that sort of makes me feel a bit better. Just saying it out loud.

I do not want to break up with Nick.

After that, I wander back to Boots to pick up the photos.

I don't look at them until I'm on the bus home.

The first photo is the one Nick took of me when I found him in the box fort on the last day of school. I look sort of bewildered. My eyes are all wide and my mouth half open, and it's not a *terrible* photo. It's nice because it looks natural, I guess.

The second is the one Harry took when we weren't looking, and it doesn't look half as awkward as I thought it was going to. We're standing on the grass with our hands touching, just sort of looking at each other like we've come to a pause in conversation, the grass at our feet and the trees overhead looking so bright in the sun. It's kind of arty. Harry would probably be very pleased with himself.

The third is the one I took of Nick, and it *is* a terrible photo. I laugh out loud. It's hilarious actually – he's mid-blink. He'll probably throw it in the bin as soon as he sees it.

And the fourth one is the selfie we took together, Nick's arm around my shoulders and our heads together, both of us smiling, a little lens flare from the sunshine falling across Nick's chest. I look at that one for a while. Thursday was such a lovely day. I wish the past two weeks had been as lovely as that day.

There are a few after that still at school, several of Nick with his Year 13 friends and even a couple just of the school building itself, as if Nick just wants to remember what it looks like.

And then there's the one of me in Nick's car. Sitting with my legs tucked up on the seat, my sunglasses on, scrolling through my phone. It's nice. I hardly ever see pictures of me like this; they're almost always selfies or posed photos with friends.

The bus jolts suddenly and the photos fall off my lap on to the seat next to me. I slam my hand down on them before they fall on the floor but they've all spread out like playing cards, and one photo catches my eye.

It's me, asleep in Nick's bed. The streetlights outside send a soft orange glow through the thin curtains behind me. My hand is curled next to my face and my hair has gone all messy and pushed to one side, as it often does while I'm asleep, judging by what it looks

like when I wake up every day. I don't know when he took this one. I think I fell asleep before him but I honestly can't remember.

Maybe it's kind of a weird picture to take, but I can understand why Nick took it. I'd take a picture of him if he looked like that in my bed. God, that sounds creepy, doesn't it? I don't care.

As I flick through the rest of the photos, I start to realise that they're all sort of like that, all tinged purple and blue and orange, muted colours, a little blurry, like polaroids at an art-school exhibition.

Me stretched out on his bed on his laptop. Me lying on the lounge floor with my arms around his dog, Henry. Me attempting to give Henry a piggyback. Me several steps ahead in the field behind his house from when we took Henry for a walk. Me standing at the top of a hill, holding out my arms – I remember him taking that one. Me giving him side-eye as I caught him trying to take a picture of me against the view, the sunlit horizon and the fields and the river. A selfie of us together. A selfie of us with me holding Henry up so he could be in it too. A selfie of us making stupid faces. Back at his house, a blurred close-up of me laughing from when he'd thrust the camera at my face. The light gets darker, bluer, a photo of me curled up on the lounge sofa, the TV screen illuminating the tips of my hair. Me cross-legged on his bed in just my T-shirt and boxers, pointing at the camera, smiling. And then the one of me asleep.

There are so many of just me.

Me.

Nick just took a ton of photos of me.

Nick's not a hugely creative person, he's never been interested in photography or art or anything like that.

I think he just took them because he wanted to remember what this was like. What our life is like now. Chilling round each other's houses, going on walks, eating together, sleeping together.

It sounds boring but it's so wonderful.

It is. I feel myself tear up just looking at our life together.

I love this. I love us. I love our weird, boring life.

I take my phone out of my pocket and take a picture of our stupid-face selfie in the field. I send it to Nick.

NICK

My mate Sai has come round to stage an intervention. He's going to Cambridge Uni in the autumn so I'm not entirely surprised that he's smart enough to pick up on the fact that I am approximately seventy miles away from okay, but he hasn't said anything useful so far and now we're playing Mario Kart and eating Percy Pigs.

After we've been gaming for around half an hour and chatting casually about A Level revision and summer and how utterly shit Harry's party was yesterday, Sai finally says, "So what exactly are you both having an argy-bargy about?" He puts the Wii remote down, swivels round on the sofa and folds his arms. "Because it sounds like nothing, to be honest."

I sigh and pause the game. "Charlie broke up with me, mate."

"Oh, *come on*. Why the *bloody hell* would he do that?"

"I have no idea."

"Are you sure that's what he was trying to do?"

"Honestly, I'm not even sure. He was so drunk. He just kept telling me I should break up with him. And I just lost it at him."

Sai adjusts his glasses and runs a hand through his hair. "Sounds like you need to have a chat with him, dude."

"I don't know what to say." I put down my Wii remote down and look at him. "Help me."

"Why am I the relationship expert? I've never even been in a relationship."

"You're smart. You're doing English Lit at uni."

"English Lit is utterly useless in the real world, Nicholas. *Utterly useless*. Trust me. Chaucer and John Donne aren't going to help you with this."

This makes me laugh. "I don't even know who they are."

"*Exactly*."

I lean my head back on the sofa. "I think he... just... thought it was a good time to end our relationship. Like, teenage relationships never last. It's a bit weird that we've made it this far anyway. And we're so fucking *dull* as well; like, we hardly do anything interesting. We're the most basic teenage relationship."

"Basic teenage relationship?" Sai splutters. "Have you seen yourselves? You hang around with each other every single day and somehow haven't wanted to kill each other yet. You've started

sleeping round each other's houses regularly on *school nights*! You can communicate by just *looking* at each other! Trust me, I've played board games with you two." He shakes his head. "A basic teenage relationship is daring to hold hands outside the school gate and going on cinema-and-Nando's dates on Saturday afternoons."

I stare at him.

"If you want to break up," he says, pointing a finger at me, "go right ahead. If you're bored and want it to be over, fine. But just because you're not going on fucking amazing dates every weekend doesn't mean you're *boring* and definitely doesn't mean you need to break up. And just because Elle and Tao aren't, like, passionately in love any more, doesn't mean that you and Charlie aren't."

He slaps his hands on his legs and leans back.

"Shit," I say.

When I pick up my phone a couple of hours later, I have a message.

The name on the screen reads **Charlie Spring**.

FIVE

CHARLIE

I send him another picture two hours later. The one of us kissing that I took on my phone.

Two hours after that, I send him a third picture. The selfie we took in school on his last day.

The next morning, an old selfie of us I find on my Tumblr.

Half an hour later, one of our first selfies, back when we started going out.

And I carry on like that until Monday. Picture after picture until I've sent every single selfie of us I have saved on my phone.

The little 'Read' tick appears on all of them until around Sunday afternoon. Then he stops reading them.

And he says nothing. He doesn't reply.

As soon as Victoria gets home from her exam on Monday, I tell her all about it.

"He's not replying," I say. It's actually embarrassing how panicked I sound. "What does that mean?"

She stands at the door, not even taking her shoes off.

"You got those photos?" she says.

"In my room."

"Go get them."

"Why?"

"We're posting them through his letterbox."

"Why will that help?"

"Because texts are dumb." She shrugs. "And a gesture is needed."

I laugh. "Who are you?"

"A born-again woman. Willing to put aside my apathy for the sake of romance." She blinks and puts her hand on her heart. "Jesus, I gave myself indigestion saying that out loud."

Victoria's friend Becky drives us. Becky keeps looking at me in the rear-view mirror. I've never been truly sure whether Becky likes me or not, but right now, I don't think it matters.

It only takes a minute to drive there, but Victoria says we have to drive because a quick getaway will be vital to the success of the 'gesture'. Sitting in the back seat, I flick through the photos again. Should I post all of them through the letterbox? Just a few? Just one?

I make the decision and take a pen out of my pocket.

NICK

I get home from my Monday afternoon exam, dump my bag on the floor in the hallway and fall on to the living room sofa. It didn't go too badly today. Only two more to go, and then that's it. Summer.

Summer. What am I going to do with all of that time?

I almost don't want my exams to end now.

Charlie started sending me blank texts on Saturday while Sai was round. I don't really know what they're supposed to mean. My phone's quite old and I dropped it down the stairs a couple of months ago so I assume it's a glitch. I haven't turned it on since yesterday afternoon. Seeing Charlie's name keep popping up was making my stomach lurch every single time.

"Nicky? Is that you, love?" My mum calls from the kitchen.

"Yeah," I shout.

"You've got post."

I groan and rise from the sofa. I stumble towards the kitchen and walk towards the table, where there's a brown envelope with the word 'Nick' on it, no address.

It's in Charlie's handwriting.

And my stomach lurches harder than it has done all weekend.

"Oh my God," I say.

"What's up?" Mum brings two mugs of tea over to the table and sits down, looking at me expectantly.

"It's from Charlie."

Mum gapes. We both stare at the envelope for a long moment.

"Well, open it then!"

And I do.

Inside the envelope is a photograph – the sort you get developed from disposable cameras. And I know immediately that I took this one. I remember the exact moment I decided to take it, walking into my room after getting a glass of water to find Charlie curled up so beautifully in my bed, the orange street-lamp light shining on his skin, and I felt like if I was going to die, this would be what I wanted to see last.

I turn the photo over and there's Charlie's handwriting.

Hey. You take a lot of pictures of me. D'you have a crush on me or something? How embarrassing. If you wanna talk, I'll be at the Truham Primary School Summer Fete tomorrow (Tuesday) at 3 o'clock... wow this isn't a rom-com lol. I'm sorry for how sappy this is. Btw I love you. Ok bye xxxx

CHARLIE

I haven't felt this nervous since I had to do my bloody Head Boy campaign speech in front of the entire school.

What if Nick didn't even *see* the photo? What if it, like, slipped underneath the doormat? Or his mum threw it away by accident? What if he saw the photo, tore it up, and didn't even notice the note on the back?

What if he read it and still doesn't turn up?

I arrive at Truham Primary School's Summer Fete, which takes place every year on their school field, with Victoria and our dad at around two o'clock. We spend most of the following hour wandering round with our younger brother, Oliver, who's in Year 4 at the school. Dad gives him money to do the tombola and play on the bouncy castle and the coconut shy, Victoria plays against him on the table football they've got set up in the middle of the field, and I mainly stand there, repeatedly checking my phone and searching around for my boyfriend. Ex-boyfriend? No. Not ex. Not yet.

I'm not giving up yet.

At quarter to three I go and wait near the entrance to the field, just inside the tennis court. It reminds me too much of the Truham tennis court, the day when all this had started, all these stupid, pointless feelings.

Charlie Spring

(14:54) i'm in the tennis court!! if ur coming

He doesn't text me back. It doesn't even say he's read the message. I feel myself start to sweat a little. Is this it? Am I going to give up after this? Am I going to be able to give up?

What am I going to say to him? Am I just going to beg him not to break up with me?

What if he turns up and still says he wants to break up?

I take a deep breath.

This is it, I guess.

I look up and watch as Nick walks through the tennis-court gate.

Having not seen him for over two weeks, just the sight of him makes me want to run up to him and kiss him and hold him and not let go of him for at least twenty minutes. I clench my fists and stay very still as he walks up to me. God, everything about him is so perfect.

"Hi," I say, as he stops and leans against the tennis court fence in front of me. I try to think of something else to say, but nothing comes to mind except 'you are beautiful' and 'I love you'.

"Hi," he says, with a nervous smile.

There's a pause.

"I got the photo," he says, and then shakes his head. "Well, duh. Here I am."

I huff out a laugh. "Genuinely the most embarrassing thing I have ever done."

"And you call *me* embarrassing."

"That photo was pretty embarrassing, though."

"True. We're actually both pathetic." He grins and I feel a pang of hope.

"You didn't text me back, bitch," I say, because that's what we always say when one of us doesn't text the other back.

But instead of his usual funny retort, Nick just blinks and says, "You were just sending me blank texts. I thought it was a glitch or something." He pulls his phone out of his pocket and shows me his messages. There's the one I sent him five minutes ago, and then there's just blank message after blank message.

Oh.

Right.

"Why, what did they say?" Nick looks at me curiously.

"Oh... I was, erm... sending you all the pictures, like, one-by-one..." I run a hand through my hair. "That's so awkward. Wow. Sorry."

"Pictures of us, you mean?"

"Haha... yeah..."

"I don't think this phone can get picture messages anymore."

I stare at him. "Can't it?"

"Don't think so. You know I dropped down the stairs it a couple of months ago? It's been doing some weird things since then."

I shake my head, amazed. "I knew you'd dropped it but I didn't know about the photo thing."

He shrugs. "Neither did I."

"Oh."

"Can I see them now?"

He's not laughing at me. He's serious. He doesn't think this was stupid.

"Yeah." I take my phone out of my pocket and we scroll through the pictures one-by-one, laughing at the stupid ones and pausing on the cute ones. Occasionally we get to one that reminds us of an old day out and we stop and talk about it and remember, remember the silly dates we've been on and the terrible ones and the great ones, the repetitive days we spend indoors and outdoors, at school and at home. By the end, we're both sitting on the asphalt with our backs against the fence, the sun shining off the brilliant green court and the white of our shoes.

We sit in silence for a minute, and then he says, his voice so quiet I only just catch it over the buzz of the crowd behind us, "I don't want to break up with you."

And I could honestly cry right there. I could just cry with relief.

"Me neither," I say. "Sorry if I sounded like I did. I really didn't."

"Same." He chuckles. "I have no idea what we were arguing about."

"Me neither."

"Sorry I shouted at you. And didn't drive you home."

"Sorry I got drunk and made out with you in front of everyone. And cried."

"Sorry I called you a dick."

"Sorry I told you to leave."

"Sorry for talking about uni all the time."

"Sorry for getting pissed off with you talking about uni all the time."

He laughs, an amazing, boyish, Nick laugh. He rolls his head on to my shoulder. "Can we stop now?"

I find his hand and take it in mine. I lean against him and he still smells like him, like home. "Yeah."

"I don't want to break up with you, ever," he says.

“Same.”

“Maybe that’s stupid.”

“I don’t care,” I say.

“Me neither,” he says.

He tilts his head up again and kisses me and I haven’t felt this happy for weeks, months, maybe ever, and something is different too, something I can’t quite place. He brings a hand up to my cheek and I don’t think things have gone back to normal – instead, we’ve entered an entirely new era, one where we’re better, surer, stronger together.

Wow. I really am embarrassing.

“Also, I bought you chocolate,” I say, when we break apart after a while. I take the Oreo Dairy Milk bar out of my pocket, hoping it hasn’t melted too much in the heat.

“Oh man.” He grabs it and tears it open. “That’s it. You’ve sealed the deal now. We’re practically married.” He pops a chunk into his mouth and then holds it out to me. “Want some?”

I stare at the chocolate and feel that jolt of fear that I always get, but something, for some reason in that moment, makes me say, “Yeah, okay.”

NICK

We decide to ditch the fete. Oliver will be fine with Tori and their Dad, and there isn’t really much for us two to do there anyway. We decide the beach is a much better idea.

It’s about an hour’s drive to the beach we always go to, so Charlie connects my iPod to the car radio and plays some Everything Everything, then Alt-J, then The Maccabees. There are closer beaches, but they’re always busy and disgusting, packed with loud teenagers and toddlers and people fighting for a spot to lay their towel.

Our beach is a lot smaller. It has a thin pier you can walk down, with a bench at the end, and a massive arcade just across the road that stays open until 10pm. There never seems to be many people on the beach itself, apart from a few dog-walkers and elderly folk, and it’s no different today. It’s just open space and flat blue sea and a beautiful horizon, as if the whole world has been made just for us.

We walk up and down the beach, talking, and we walk up the pier and sit on the bench at the end and talk and kiss, and then we get the rug I keep in my car and find a spot on the beach to sit down and then lie down and just be silent for a while.

We walk to the fish and chip shop we always go to and sit on the brick wall outside and eat and talk, and then we decide taking off our shoes and socks and rolling up our jeans and paddling in the sea is a good idea but quickly learn, once our jeans get wet, that it probably wasn't a very good idea after all.

We take a bunch of photos on Charlie's phone after talking about how he doesn't take enough. We go to the arcade for an hour and play on all our favourites: air hockey, the jungle car game, the skiing game, the basketball game, the coin machines. We get enough tickets for a bouncy ball.

We sit at the end of the pier again and watch the sunset, because that's what you've got to do on days like this. The clouds turn pink and purple, the sky orange, and then everything is dark blue.

On the drive back, Charlie falls asleep in my car. I turn the radio on and thank the universe that my life is like this.

SIX

CHARLIE

Aled was right. Nick and I are literally two idiots.

We spend the whole day talking about us and what it's going to be like when we're long distance and it honestly only makes me believe even harder that we're going to be fine, that everything's going to be okay.

Everything is going to be okay. Seriously, this time.

Fuck this university thing. It really messes stuff up, doesn't it? God.

Nick drives me back home, but I tell him to drive to his house instead. I text Victoria that I'm staying over his. She'll explain to our parents.

And it sounds really silly but we stay up late just talking and browsing the Internet and watching videos and talking again, laughing, dozing off. I wonder what it'd be like to have a whole life of this. I think it'd be pretty great. Not gonna lie.

And then one minute we're lying there and the next we're kissing, and it's not like this is anything particularly new, but it *feels* new, it feels different somehow. I guess I don't want to make this too romantic or anything. At the end of the day, it's just kissing, but. . . I don't know. How is it that this still makes me so. . . how have two years gone by and I still feel like this in his arms?

We kiss for a long time, like it's two years ago and we're on Nick's lounge sofa trying to watch a film. Impossible. I can't think about anything else when he's running his hands so gently through my hair, across my back, over my hips. Suddenly he's pulling my T-shirt off and laughing when I can't undo his shirt buttons, I'm asking if he wants to and he's saying yes before I've even finished my sentence, he's undoing my belt, I'm reaching into his bedside drawer for a condom, we're kissing again, we're rolling over, obviously you can see where this is going.

I don't know if it's because we're feeling especially emotional, or we're just tired, or these past couple of weeks have been too much, but – and this is gonna sound really weird – this time reminds me so much of the first time we had sex. We were both fucking *terrified*.

That first time was so bad. So bad it was kind of good. Does that make any sense?

We're scared this time for a different reason, I can tell. I could pretend that we aren't scared that we're approaching the end of this, of *us*, but that would be a lie.

Nick touches me like he's scared that any minute I could disintegrate forever. When we're finally completely undressed he just stops and stares like he's trying to memorise every second of this. When we're moving he keeps saying my name over and over until I find it too ridiculous and tell him to shut up, but he just grins and keeps on saying it anyway, whispering it against my skin just to make me laugh. I hold him so tight against me, as if that'll keep us here, keep him here with me. I used to think I was pathetic for thinking dumb, romantic stuff like that. I don't any more. I just keep thinking it. I keep wanting him here. I keep wanting him to stay.

Afterwards we lie there for a while, Nick's head on my chest and our legs entwined. I reach over to his bedside table and turn the radio on, noticing that it's gone 3am – how did that happen? I close my eyes because I think Nick might be asleep, but several minutes later I hear a *click* and open my eyes to find he's taken a photo of us lying there, this time on his phone.

"*Nick!*" I grab his phone and check the photo as he laughs gleefully.

"Nothing like a post-sex candid."

I don't reply because I'm just staring at the photo – it's like the ones he took on his disposable camera, natural and un-staged, Nick curled against me and smirking up at the camera, my head leaning on his, my eyes shut and mouth slightly open.

"Don't delete it," says Nick.

"I'm not." I look at it for a second more, and then hand it back to him. "Don't put it on Instagram."

"Can I set it as my wallpaper?"

"What, and get rid of Henry? Do you finally love me more than your dog?"

"Mmm, that's going a bit far..."

I roll over, shoving him off me and flipping us so I'm lying on top of him. "Rude."

Nick laughs and wraps his arms around me. "Okay, fine, I love you more than my dog."

"Good."

"I love you more than anyone, actually."

He says this a little quieter. I move my head out from the crook of his neck so I can meet his eyes.

"Is that weird?" he continues, and then huffs out a small laugh. "I'm only eighteen."

"I don't know," I say. "Maybe."

It is weird. We both know it's weird. We both know *we're* weird, we're not like other couples our age. It's weird that we hang out every single day, it's weird that we'd rather just be with each other all the time. Every day we wonder when we're going to stop feeling like this and get over our teenage relationship. But it never happens. We just keep on going.

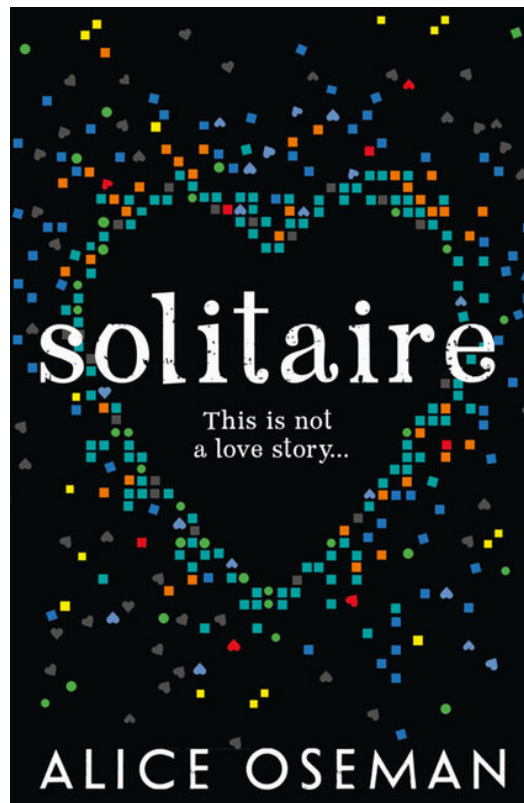
But it's good too. God, it's *so* good.

"I'm weird too," I say, because saying 'I love you more than anyone too' back to him doesn't feel quite adequate, even though I honestly love him more than anyone else in the entire world.

Nick squeezes me and says, "Yeah," because he already knows.

NICK

The next morning I wake up to the sound of Charlie's phone alarm and he makes honestly the most adorable grumbling sound I've ever heard and even though I'm half-asleep I just start laughing. He turns the alarm off and rolls over and asks, "What?" and I'm like, "Don't go to school today. You don't have to go to school... it's only study leave..." And I reach out my arms and pull him closer to me and he shuts his eyes and mumbles, "Fine."



“I don’t ever remember not being serious. As far as I’m concerned, I came out of the womb spouting cynicism and wishing for rain”

My name is Tori Spring. I like to sleep and I like to blog. Last year – before all that stuff with Charlie and before I had to face the harsh realities of A-Levels and university applications and the fact that one day I really will have to start talking to people – I had friends. Things were very different, I guess, but that’s all over now.

Now there’s Solitaire. And Michael Holden.

I don’t know what Solitaire are trying to do, and I don’t care about Michael Holden.
I really don’t.

“*The Catcher in the Rye* for the digital age” *The Times*

Turn the page to read an extract from *Solitaire*...

ONE

I AM AWARE as I step into the common room that the majority of people here are almost dead, including me. I have been reliably informed that post-Christmas blues are entirely normal and that we should expect to feel somewhat numb after the ‘happiest’ time of the year, but I don’t feel so different now to how I felt on Christmas Eve, or on Christmas Day, or on any other day since the Christmas holidays started. I’m back now and it’s another year. Nothing is going to happen.

I stand there. Becky and I look at each other.

“Tori,” says Becky, “you look a little bit like you want to kill yourself.”

She and the rest of Our Lot have sprawled themselves over a collection of revolving chairs around the common-room computer desks. As it’s the first day back, there has been a widespread hair-and-make-up effort across the entire sixth form and I immediately feel inadequate.

I deflate into a chair and nod philosophically. “It’s funny because it’s true.”

She looks at me some more, but doesn’t really look, and we laugh at something that wasn’t funny. Becky then realises that I am in no mood to do anything so she moves away. I lean into my arms and fall half asleep.

My name is Victoria Spring. I think you should know that I make up a lot of stuff in my head and then get sad about it. I like to sleep and I like to blog. I am going to die someday.

Rebecca Allen is probably my only real friend at the moment. She is also probably my best friend. I am as yet unsure whether these two facts are related. In any case, Becky Allen is very pretty and has very long purple hair. It has come to my attention that, if you have purple hair, people often look at you. If you are pretty with purple hair, people often *stay* looking at you, thus resulting in you becoming a widely recognised and outstandingly popular figure in adolescent society; the sort of figure that everyone claims

to know yet probably hasn't even spoken to. She has 2,098 friends on Facebook.

Right now, Becky's talking to this other girl from Our Lot, Evelyn Foley. Evelyn is considered 'retro' because she has messy hair and wears a necklace with a triangle on it.

"The *real* question though," says Evelyn, "is whether there's sexual tension between Harry and *Malfoy*."

I'm not sure whether Becky genuinely likes Evelyn. Sometimes I think people only pretend to like each other.

"Only in fan fictions, Evelyn," says Becky. "Please keep your fantasies between yourself and your blog."

Evelyn laughs. "I'm just saying. Malfoy helps Harry in the end, right? He's a nice guy deep down, yeah? So why does he bully Harry for seven years? Enormous. Closet. Homosexual." With each word, she claps her hands together. It really doesn't emphasise her point. "It's a well-established fact that people tease people they fancy. The psychology here is unarguable."

"Evelyn," says Becky. "*Firstly*, I *resent* the fangirl idea that Draco Malfoy is some kind of beautifully tortured soul who is searching for redemption and understanding. Secondly, the only non-canon couple that is even *worth* discussion is Snily."

"*Snily?*"

"Snape and Lily."

Evelyn appears to be deeply offended. "I can't believe you don't support Drarry when you ship *Snape and Lily*. I mean, at least Drarry is a realistic possibility." She slowly shakes her head. "Like, obviously, Lily went for someone hot and hilarious like James Potter."

"James Potter was a resplendent twat. Especially to Lily. J.K. made that quite clear. And dude – if you don't like Snape by the end of the series, then you miss the entire concept of *Harry Potter*."

"If Snily had been a *thing*, there would have *been* no Harry Potter."

"Without a Harry, Voldemort might not have, like, committed mass genocide."

Becky turns to me, and so does Evelyn. I deduce that I am under pressure to contribute something.

I sit up. “You’re saying that because it’s Harry’s fault that all these muggles and wizards died, it would have been better if there’d been no Harry Potter at all and no books or films or anything?”

I get the impression that I’ve ruined this conversation so I mumble an excuse and lift myself off my chair and hurry out of the common-room door. Sometimes I hate people. This is probably very bad for my mental health.

*

There are two grammar schools in our town: Harvey Greene Grammar School for Girls, or ‘Higgs’ as it is popularly known, and Truham Grammar School for Boys. Both schools, however, accept males *and* females in Years 12 and 13, the two final years of school known countrywide as the sixth form. So, now that I am in Year 12, I have had to face a sudden influx of the male species. Boys at Higgs are on a par with mythical creatures and having an actual *real* boyfriend puts you at the head of the social hierarchy, but personally, thinking or talking too much about ‘boy issues’ makes me want to shoot myself in the face.

Even if I did care about that stuff, it’s not like we get to show off, thanks to our stunning school uniform. Usually, sixth-formers don’t have to wear school uniform; however, Higgs sixth form are forced to wear a hideous one. Grey is the theme, which is fitting for such a dull place.

I arrive at my locker to find a pink Post-it note on its door. On that, someone has drawn a left-pointing arrow, suggesting that I should, perhaps, look in that direction. Irritated, I turn my head to the left. There’s another Post-it note a few lockers along. And, on the wall at the end of the corridor, another. People are walking past them, totally oblivious. What can I say? People aren’t observant. People don’t question stuff like this. They never think twice about *déjà vu* when there could be a glitch in the Matrix. They walk past tramps in the street without even glancing at their misfortune. They don’t psychoanalyse the creators of slasher-horror when they’re probably all psychopaths.

I pluck the Post-it from my locker and wander to the next.

Sometimes I like to fill my days with little things that other people don't care about. It makes me feel like I'm doing something important, mainly because no one else is doing it.

This is one of those times.

The Post-its start popping up all over the place. Like I said, everyone is ignoring them; instead, they are going on with their day and talking about boys and clothes and pointless stuff. Year 9s and 10s strut around in their rolled-up skirts and thigh-high socks over their tights. Year 9s and 10s always seem to be happy. It makes me hate them a bit. Then again, I hate quite a lot of things.

The penultimate Post-it I find depicts an arrow pointing upwards, or forwards, and is situated on the door of a closed computer room on the first floor. Black fabric covers the door window. This particular computer room, C16, was closed last year for refurbishment, but it doesn't look like anyone's bothered getting started. It sort of makes me feel sad, to tell you the truth, but I open C16's door anyway, enter and close it behind me.

There's one long window stretching the length of the far wall, and the computers in here are bricks. Solid cubes. Apparently, I've time-travelled to the 1990s.

I find the final Post-it note on the back wall, bearing a URL:

SOLITAIRE.CO.UK

In case you live under a rock or are home-schooled or are just an idiot, Solitaire is a card game you play by yourself. It's what I used to spend my IT lessons doing and it probably did a lot more for my intelligence than actually paying attention.

It's then that someone opens the door.

"Dear God, the age of the computers in here must be a *criminal offence*."

I turn slowly around.

A boy stands before the closed door.

"I can hear the haunting symphony of dial-up connection," he says, eyes drifting, and, after several long seconds, he finally notices that he's not the only person in the room.

He's a very ordinary-looking, not ugly but not hot, miscellaneous boy. His most noticeable feature is a pair of large, thick-framed square glasses,

the sort similar to those 3D cinema glasses that twelve-year-olds pop the lenses out of and wear because they think it makes them look 'rad'. God, I hate it when people wear glasses like that. He's tall and has a side parting. In one hand, he holds a mug; in the other a piece of paper and his school planner.

As he absorbs my face, his eyes flare up and I swear to God they double in size. He leaps towards me like a pouncing lion, fiercely enough that I stumble backwards in fear that he might crush me completely. He leans forward so that his face is centimetres from my own. Through my reflection in his ridiculously oversized spectacles, I notice that he has one blue eye and one green eye. Heterochromia.

He grins violently.

"Victoria Spring!" he cries, raising his arms into the air.

I say and do nothing. I have a headache.

"You are Victoria Spring," he says. He holds the piece of paper up to my face. It's a photograph. Of me. Underneath, in tiny letters: Victoria Spring, 11A. It has been on display near the staffroom – in Year 11, I was a form leader, mostly because no one else wanted to do it so I got volunteered. All the form leaders had their pictures taken. Mine is awful. It's before I cut my hair so I sort of look like the girl from *The Ring*. It's like I don't even have a face.

I look into the blue eye. "Did you tear that right off the display?"

He steps back a little, retreating from his invasion of my personal space. He's got this insane smile on his face. "I said I'd help someone look for you." He taps his chin with his planner. "Blond guy ... skinny trousers ... walking around like he didn't really know where he was ..."

I do not know *any* guys and certainly not any blond guys who wear skinny trousers.

I shrug. "How did you know I was in here?"

He shrugs too. "I didn't. I came in because of the arrow on the door. I thought it looked quite mysterious. And here you are! What a *hilarious* twist of fate!"

He takes a sip of his drink. I start to wonder if this boy has mental problems.

"I've seen you before," he says, still smiling.

I find myself squinting at his face. Surely I must have seen him at some point in the corridors. Surely I would remember those hideous glasses. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen *you* before.”

“That’s not surprising,” he says. “I’m in Year 13, so you wouldn’t see me much. And I only joined your school last September. I did my Year 12 at Truham.”

That explains it. Four months isn’t enough time for me to commit a face to memory.

“So,” he says, tapping his mug. “What’s going on *here*?”

I step aside and point unenthusiastically to the Post-it on the back wall. He reaches up and peels it off.

“Solitaire.co.uk. Interesting. Okay. I’d say we could boot up one of these computers and check it out, but we’d probably both expire before Internet Explorer loaded. I bet you any money they all use Windows 95.”

He sits down on one of the swivel chairs and stares out of the window at the suburban landscape. Everything is lit up like it’s on fire. You can see right over the town and into the countryside. He notices me looking too.

“It’s like it’s pulling you out, isn’t it?” he says. He sighs to himself. Like a girl. “I saw this old man on my way in this morning. He was sitting at a bus stop listening to an iPod, tapping his hands on his knees, looking at the sky. How often do you see that? An old man listening to an iPod. I wonder what he was listening to. You’d think it would be classical, but it could have been anything. I wonder if it was sad music.” He lifts up his feet and crosses them on top of a table. “I hope it wasn’t.”

“Sad music is okay,” I say, “in moderation.”

He swivels round to me and straightens his tie.

“You are definitely Victoria Spring, aren’t you.” This should be a question, but he says it like he’s already known for a long time.

“Tori,” I say, intentionally monotone. “My name is Tori.”

He laughs at me. It’s a very loud, forced laugh. “Like Tori Amos?”

“No.” Pause. “No, not like Tori Amos.”

He puts his hands in his blazer pockets. I fold my arms.

“Have you been in here before?” he asks.

“No.”

He nods. “Interesting.”

I widen my eyes and shake my head at him. “What?”

“What *what*?”

“What’s interesting?” I don’t think I could sound less interested.

“We both came looking for the same thing.”

“And what is that?”

“*An answer.*”

I raise my eyebrows. He gazes at me through his glasses. The blue eye is so pale it’s almost white. It’s got an entire personality of its own.

“Aren’t mysteries *fun*?” he says. “Don’t you *wonder*?”

It’s then that I realise that I probably don’t. I realise that I could walk out of here and literally not give a crap about solitaire.co.uk or this annoying, loud-mouthed guy ever again.

But because I want him to stop being so goddamn patronising, I swiftly remove my phone from my blazer pocket, type solitaire.co.uk into the Internet address bar and open up the web page.

What appears almost makes me laugh – it’s an empty blog. A troll blog, I guess.

What a pointless, pointless day this is.

I thrust the phone into his face. “Mystery solved, Sherlock.”

At first, he keeps on grinning, like I’m joking, but soon his eyes focus downwards on to the phone screen and, in a kind of stunned disbelief, he removes the phone from my hand.

“It’s ... an empty blog ...” he says, not to me but to himself, and suddenly (and I don’t know how this happens) I feel deeply, *deeply* sorry for him. Because he looks so bloody *sad*. He shakes his head and hands my phone back to me. I don’t really know what to do. He literally looks like someone’s just died.

“Well, er ...” I shuffle my feet. “I’m going to form now.”

“No, no, wait!” He jumps up so we’re facing each other.

There is a significantly awkward pause.

He studies me, squinting, then studies the photograph, then back to me, then back to the photo. “You cut your hair!”

I bite my lip, holding back the sarcasm. “Yes,” I say sincerely. “Yes, I cut my hair.”

“It was so *long*.”

“Yes, it was.”

“Why did you cut it?”

I had gone shopping by myself at the end of the summer holidays because there was so much crap I needed for sixth form and Mum and Dad were busy with all of the Charlie stuff that was going on and I just wanted it out of the way. What I'd failed to remember was that I am awful at shopping. My old school bag was ripped and dirty so I trailed through nice places – River Island and Zara and Urban Outfitters and Mango and Accessorize. But all the nice bags there were, like, fifty pounds, so that wasn't happening. Then I tried the cheaper places – New Look and Primark and H&M – but all the bags there were just tacky. I ended up going round all the shops selling bags a billion bloody times before having a slight breakdown on a bench by Costa Coffee in the middle of the shopping centre. I thought about starting Year 12 and all the things that I needed to do and all the new people that I might have to meet and all the people I would have to talk to and I caught a reflection of myself in a Waterstones window and I realised then that most of my face was covered up and who in the name of God would want to talk to me like that and I started to feel all of this hair on my forehead and my cheeks and how it plastered my shoulders and back and I felt it creeping around me like worms, choking me to death. I began to breathe very fast, so I went straight into the nearest hairdresser's and had it all cut to my shoulders and out of my face. The hairdresser didn't want to do it, but I was very insistent. I spent my school bag money on a haircut.

"I just wanted it shorter," I say.

He steps closer. I shuffle backwards.

"You," he says, "do not say anything you mean, do you?"

I laugh again. It's a pathetic sort of expulsion of air, but for me that qualifies as a laugh. "Who *are* you?"

He freezes, leans back, opens out his arms as if he's the Second Coming of Christ and announces in a deep and echoing voice: "My name is Michael Holden."

Michael Holden.

"And who are you, Victoria Spring?"

I can't think of anything to say because that is what my answer would be really. Nothing. I am a vacuum. I am a void. I am nothing.

Mr Kent's voice blares abruptly from the tannoy. I turn round and look up at the speaker as his voice resonates down.

“All sixth-formers should make their way to the common room for a short sixth-form meeting.”

When I turn back round, the room is empty. I’m glued to the carpet. I open my hand and find the SOLITAIRE.CO.UK Post-it inside it. I don’t know at what point the Post-it made its way from Michael Holden’s hand to my own, but there it is.

And this, I suppose, is it.

This is probably how it starts.

TWO

THE LARGE MAJORITY of teenagers who attend Higgs are soulless, conformist idiots. I have successfully integrated myself into a small group of girls who I consider to be ‘good people’, but sometimes I still feel that I might be the only person with a consciousness, like a video-game protagonist, and the rest are computer-generated extras who have only a select few actions, such as ‘initiate meaningless conversation’ and ‘hug’.

The other thing about Higgs teenagers, and maybe most teenagers, is that they put very little effort into ninety per cent of everything. I don’t think that this is a bad thing because there’ll be lots of time for ‘effort’ later in our lives, and trying too hard at this point is a waste of energy which might otherwise be spent on lovely things such as sleeping and eating and illegally downloading music. I don’t really try hard to do anything. Neither do many other people. Walking into the common room and being greeted by a hundred teenagers slumped over chairs, desks and the floor is not an unusual occurrence. It’s like everyone’s been gassed.

Kent hasn’t arrived yet. I head over to Becky and Our Lot in the computer corner; they seem to be having a conversation about whether Michael Cera is actually attractive or not.

“Tori. Tori. Tori.” Becky taps me repeatedly on the arm. “You can back me up on this. You’ve seen *Juno*, yeah? You think he’s cute, right?” She slaps her hands against her cheeks and her eyes kind of roll backwards. “Awkward boys are the hottest, aren’t they?”

I place my hands on her shoulders. “Stay calm, Rebecca. Not everyone loves the Cera like you do.”

She starts to babble on about *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, but I’m not really listening. Michael Cera is not the Michael I’m thinking about.

I somehow excuse myself from this discussion and begin to patrol the common room.

Yes. That's right. I'm looking for Michael Holden.

At this point, I'm not really sure *why* I am looking for him. As I've probably already implied, I do not get interested in very many things, particularly not people, but it irritates me when someone thinks that they can start a conversation and then just get up and *leave*.

It's *rude*, you know?

I pass all the common-room cliques. Cliques are a very *High School Musical* concept, but the reason they are so clichéd is because they really do exist. In a predominantly all-girls' school, you can pretty much expect each year to be divided into three main categories:

1. Loud, experienced girls who use fake IDs to get into clubs, wear a lot of things that they see on blogging sites, frequently pretend to starve themselves, enjoy a good bit of orange tan, socially or addictively smoke, are open to drugs, know a lot about the world. I very much disapprove of these people.
2. Strange girls who appear to have no real concept of dressing well or controlling their freakish behaviour, examples being drawing on each other with whiteboard pens and being physically unable to wash their hair; girls who somehow end up with boyfriends who are just as terrifying as they are; girls who on average have a mental age at least three years younger than their physical age. These girls sadden me greatly because often I feel that they could be very normal if they put in some effort.
3. So-called 'normal' girls. Approximately half of these have steady, average boyfriends. Are aware of fashion trends and popular culture. Usually pleasant, some quiet, some loud, enjoy being with friends, enjoy a good party, enjoy shopping and movies, enjoy life.

I'm not saying that everyone fits into one of these groups. I love that there are exceptions because I hate that these groups exist. I mean, I don't know where *I'd* go. I suppose I'd be group 3 because that's definitely what Our Lot are. Then again, I don't feel very similar to anyone from Our Lot. I don't feel very similar to anyone at all.

I circle the room three or four times before concluding that he's not here. Whatever. Maybe I just imagined Michael Holden. It's not like I care

anyway. I go back to Our Lot's corner, slump on to the floor at Becky's feet and close my eyes.

*

The common-room door swings open as Mr Kent, Deputy Head, strides into the crowd, followed by his usual posse: Miss Strasser, who is too young and too pretty to be any kind of teacher, and our Head Girl, Zelda Okoro (I'm not even joking – her name really is that fantastic). Kent is a sharply-angled sort of man most often noted for his startling resemblance to Alan Rickman, and is probably the only teacher in this school to hold true intelligence. He is also my English teacher, and has been for over five years, so we actually know each other fairly well. That's probably a bit weird. We do have a Headmistress, Mrs Lemaire, who is widely rumoured to be a member of the French government, explaining why she never appears to be present in her own school.

"I want some *quiet*," says Kent, standing in front of an interactive whiteboard, which hangs on the wall just below our school motto: *Confortamini in Domino et in potentia virtutis eius*. The sea of grey uniforms turns to face him. For a few moments, Kent says nothing. He does this a lot.

Becky and I grin at each other and start counting the seconds. This is a game we play. I can't remember when it started, but every single time we're in assembly or a sixth-form meeting or whatever, we count the length of his silences. Our record is seventy-nine seconds. No joke.

When we hit twelve and Kent opens his mouth to speak—

Music begins to play out of the tannoy.

It's the Darth Vader theme from *Star Wars*.

An instant uneasiness soars over the sixth form. People turn their heads wildly from side to side, whispering, wondering why Kent would play music through the tannoy, and why *Star Wars*. Perhaps he's going to start lecturing us on communicating with clarity, or persistence, or empathy and understanding, or skills of interdependence, which are what most of the sixth-form meetings are about. Perhaps he's trying to make a point about the importance of leadership. Only when the pictures begin to appear on the screen behind him do we realise what is, in fact, going on.

First, it's Kent's face Photoshopped into Yoda's. Then it's Kent as Jabba the Hutt.

Then it's Princess Kent in a golden bikini.

The entire sixth form bursts into uncontrollable laughter.

The real Kent, stern-faced but keeping his cool, marches out of the room. As soon as Strasser similarly disappears, people begin to tear from group to group, reliving the look in Kent's eyes when his face appeared on Natalie Portman's, complete with white Photoshop face paint and an extravagant hairdo. I have to admit, it's kind of funny.

After Kent/Darth Maul leaves the screen, and as the orchestral masterpiece reaches its climax through the speakers above our heads, the interactive whiteboard displays the following words:

SOLITAIRE.CO.UK

Becky brings the site up on a computer and Our Lot cluster round to have a good look. The troll blog has one post now, uploaded two minutes ago – a photo of Kent staring in passive anger at the board.

We all start talking. Well, everyone else does. I just sit there.

“Some kids probably thought it was clever,” snorts Becky. “They probably came up with it on their blogs and thought they'd take pictures and prove to their hipster friends how hilarious and rebellious they are.”

“Well, yeah, it *is* clever,” says Evelyn, her long-established superiority complex making its regular appearance. “It's sticking it to the *man*.”

I shake my head, because nothing is clever about it apart from the skill of the person who managed to morph Kent's face into Yoda's. That is Photoshop Talent.

Lauren is grinning widely. Lauren Romilly is a social smoker and has a mouth slightly too large for her face. “I can see the Facebook statuses already. This has probably broken my Twitter feed.”

“I need a photo of this on my blog,” continues Evelyn. “I could do with a couple of thousand more followers.”

“Go away, Evelyn,” snorts Lauren. “You're already Internet famous.”

This makes me laugh. “Just post another photo of your legs, Evelyn,” I say quietly. “They already get reblogged, like, twenty thousand times.”

Only Becky hears me. She grins at me, and I grin back, which is sort of nice because I rarely think of funny things to say.

And that's it. That's pretty much all we say about it.

Ten minutes and it's forgotten.

To tell you the truth though, this prank has made me feel kind of weird. The fact of the matter is that *Star Wars* was actually a major obsession of mine when I was a kid. I guess I haven't watched any of the films for a few years now, but hearing that music brings back something. I don't know what. Some feeling in my chest.

Ugh, I'm getting sentimental.

I bet whoever did this is really pleased with themselves. It kind of makes me hate them.

Five minutes later, I've just about dozed off, my head on the computer desk and my arms barricading my face from all forms of social interaction, when somebody pats me on the shoulder.

I jerk upwards and gaze blearily in the direction of the pat. Becky's looking at me oddly, purple strands cascading around her. She blinks.

"What?" I ask.

She points behind her, so I look.

A guy is standing there. Nervous. Face in a sort of grinning grimace. I realise what's going on, but my brain doesn't quite accept that this is possible, so I open my mouth and close it three times before coming up with:

"Jesus Christ."

The guy steps towards me.

"V-Victoria?"

Excluding my new acquaintance Michael Holden, only two people in my life have ever called me Victoria. One is Charlie. And the other is:

"Lucas Ryan," I say.

I once knew a boy named Lucas Ryan. He cried a lot, but liked Pokémon just as much as I did so I guess that made us friends. He once told me he would like to live inside a giant bubble when he grew up because you could fly everywhere and see everything, and I told him that would make a terrible house because bubbles are always empty inside. He gave me a Batman keyring for my eighth birthday, a *How to Draw Manga* book for

my ninth birthday, Pokémon cards for my tenth birthday and a T-shirt with a tiger on it for my eleventh.

I sort of have to do a double take because his face is now an entirely different shape. He'd always been smaller than me, but now he's at least a whole head taller and his voice, obviously, has broken. I start to look for things that *are* the same as eleven-year-old Lucas Ryan, but all I've got to go on is his greyish hair, skinny limbs and awkward expression.

Also, he is the 'blond guy in skinny trousers'.

"Jesus Christ," I repeat. "Hi."

He smiles and laughs. I remember the laugh. It's all in the chest. A chest laugh.

"Hi!" he says and smiles some more. A nice smile. A calm smile.

I dramatically leap to my feet and look him up and down. It's actually him.

"It's actually you," I say and have to physically restrain myself from reaching out and patting him on the shoulders. Just to check he's really there and all.

He laughs. His eyes go all squinty. "It's actually me!"

"Wh-ho-why?"

He starts to look kind of embarrassed. I remember him being like that. "I left Truham at the end of last term," he says. "I knew you went here, so ..." He fiddles with his collar. He used to do that too. "Erm ... I thought I'd try to find you. Seeing as I don't have any friends here. So, erm, yes. Hello."

I think you should be aware that I have never been very good at making friends, and primary school was no different. I acquired only the one friend during those seven years of mortifying social rejection. Yet while my primary school days are not days which I would choose to relive, there was one good thing that probably kept me going, and that was the quiet friendship of Lucas Ryan.

"Wow." Becky, unable to keep away from potential gossip, intervenes. "How do you two know each other?"

Now I am a fairly awkward person, but Lucas really takes the biscuit. He turns to Becky and goes red again and I almost feel embarrassed *for* him.

"Primary school," I say. "We were best friends."

Becky's shaped eyebrows soar. "No *waaay*." She looks at both of us once more, before focusing on Lucas. "Well, I guess I'm your replacement. I'm

Becky.” She gestures around her. “Welcome to the Land of Oppression.”

Lucas, in a mouse voice, manages: “I’m Lucas.”

He turns back to me. “We should catch up,” he says.

Is this what friendship reborn feels like?

“Yes ...” I say. The shock is draining my vocabulary. “Yes.”

People have started to give up on the sixth-form meeting as it’s the start of Period 1 and no teachers have returned.

Lucas nods at me. “Erm, I don’t really want to be late to my first lesson or anything – this whole day is going to be kind of embarrassing as it is – but I’ll talk to you some time soon, yeah? I’ll find you on Facebook.”

Becky stares in relatively severe disbelief as Lucas wanders away, and grabs me firmly by the shoulder. “Tori just talked to a *boy*. No – Tori just held a conversation *by herself*. I think I’m going to cry.”

“There, there.” I pat her on the shoulder. “Be strong. You’ll get through this.”

“I’m extremely proud of you. I feel like a proud mum.”

I snort. “I can hold conversations by myself. What do you call this?”

“I am the only exception. With everyone else, you’re about as sociable as a cardboard box.”

“Maybe I am a cardboard box.”

We both laugh.

“It’s funny ... because it’s true,” I say and I laugh again, on the outside at least. Ha ha ha.

[Click here to read more.](#)

Author Biography

Alice Oseman is an author and also a student, currently attending Durham University reading English. Her debut novel, *Solitaire*, was published to critical acclaim – “***The Catcher in the Rye* for the digital age” *The Times***. Alice has thoroughly researched sarcastic teenagers who spend a lot of time on the internet, by once being a sarcastic teenager (now a sarcastic twenty-year-old) who spends a lot of time on the internet.

Alice is from Rochester, Kent. She is active on Twitter and Tumblr – and her writing has been significantly inspired by behavioural trends on Tumblr.

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